

**JOSEPH THOMAS  
SHERIDAN LE FANU**

**HAUNTED LIVES**

TO

MRS. FITZGERALD,

OF FANE VALLEY,  
THIS STORY IS INSCRIBED,  
WITH KINDEST REGARDS,  
AND MANY PLEASANT  
RECOLLECTIONS,

BY

THE AUTHOR.

## PART I

### CHAPTER I. LAURA CHALLYS GRAY.

THE Old Brompton of my earlier recollections, with its silent lanes, its grass-plots, and flower-knots, its towering trees, and those sober old houses of dusky red brick faced with white stone, which, set round with tall flower-pots and flowering shrubs and roses, had a character of old-world comfort, and even grace, has faded and broken up like a sunset city of cloud.

When regretful memory names a place, as I name Old Brompton, I always find it call up a special picture, and always the same. Mine is no bigger than a cabinet picture. Through a short perspective, the rugged columns of half-a-dozen old trees, under shadow, with a patch of broken flickering light, I see little more than the lower half of the tall old drawingroom window — dusky brick, and a worn setting of old Caen stone. On the broad window-stone stand some flower-pots; I know not the names of the flowers, trembling stars and cups of blue and crimson; and from the chiar'oscuro of the room within leans over them the prettiest face, I almost think, this mortal world ever saw.

Beautiful cousin, Laura Challys Gray! A pretty music rings in your name, for me — with those sad notes that come from the distant past, and die in the far future.

I close my eyes, and I see you, your violet eyes, and rich brown tresses, with their golden folds, the delicate oval of your face, and your crimson lips. Oh! pretty Laura — odd, wayward, misunderstood, full of faults — with many perfections, I am sure, that others possessed not — I am going to jot down my recollections of you, and what I know of a story as odd as your character.

In this house, at the open drawingroom window, Charles Mannering — a tall young man, with a face kind, frank, and also sensitive — was standing, looking westward, where the sun was nearing the horizon, with the glow of a coming sunset. I think there is a pleasant sentiment in the artificial rurality of such a scene, and he could fancy, among the urns and roses under the distant groups of ruddy chimneys, melting in the misty light of evening, a pretty powdered Daphne ogling her piping Philander across her crook.

He liked being employed, too, by his pretty cousin. Here was a commission which had given him a world of trouble — to find her just such a house in the oldfashioned suburbs of London as he had lighted upon.

She ought to have arrived half an hour before. He was standing, as I have said, at the open drawingroom window. He was nervous about her decision upon the manner in which he had executed his commission. Her letter was in his pocket; and, while he was amusing himself with an imaginary dialogue with her, the carriage arrived at the gate, and was admitted. It was a chariot, prettiest of all carriages — why discarded now I cannot imagine — four posthorses, and two postillions. They had travelled up from Gray Forest in the oldfashioned way — by the road and posting stations — not then on that line, superseded by rail. Hot and dusty were the horses that were pulled up at the steps. He ran down, and handed his pretty cousin from the carriage, and then her elderly kinswoman and companion, fat and rather amiable, and not very active. The springs yielded to her weight, of which that sagacious lady was as conscious as the elephant, and she leaned upon his shoulder, and then upon his arm, with a cautious emphasis that made him stagger.

Good Mrs. Wardell — that was her name — came in, very red, talking and giggling, and wheezing a little, and sat down in the dining-room to divide her journey, and recruit before essaying the stairs, under care of her maid, much the more elegantly got up of the two. Charles ran upstairs to the drawingroom, where he had seen his cousin, light of foot, already looking from the window, as he lent Mrs. Wardell his arm up the steps.

Miss Laura Challys Gray was still standing between the voluminous silk curtains, looking out through one of the tall windows, as he entered the room. In shadow and reflected lights there is sometimes a transparent effect which heightens beauty; and I think he never saw her look so lovely as when she turned towards him from the light, as he entered. I pause for a moment to recall that pretty image.

She had removed her little bonnet, which dangled by its ribbon at one side from her slender fingers. Her rich brown hair, so wonderfully voluminous, in the shadow showed its golden glimmer where the dusky sunset touched it. Her large violet eyes, under the long curve of their lashes, were turned upon him. Nearly in shadow, her beautiful lips, with a light just touched in crimson, parted, and very grave. What a beautiful oval that little face was, and how richly her shadowy brown hair parted low above her brows. As she looked at him this pretty face was thoughtful and nun-like, and after a little silence she said, with a very imposing seriousness: —

“I think I shall like this out-of-the-way house, and the fifteen trees, and the half-acre of grass.”

“Oh, I assure you, there's a good deal more than you see from this. I should say there are at least two acres altogether, and fifty trees, reckoning — —”

“Reckoning the roses?” she laughed.

“No; the lilacs and laburnums, which are enormous, and deserve to be counted in,” said he.

“I think I shall like it,” she repeated a little imperiously, as much as to say, “It is your place to listen at present, and mine to speak.” “It looks old, and homely, and secluded. It has a monastic air; and has not the slightest pretension to elegance, and is perfectly dull — *thank* you. You have acquitted yourself, so far as I see, to admiration. I can't pronounce absolutely, however, until I look about me a little more.”

She spoke with such perfect good faith, and such an air of gravity and wisdom, that he was on the point of laughing.

But that would not have done: for Challys Gray, as she liked to style herself, was an imperious little queen; and when she was serious, expected all the world to be grave also.

There was not a folding door between the front and back drawingrooms, but an ordinary door, with a very heavily carved casing, like the others in that house, which projected almost like a porch. Under this passed Miss Gray, and looked slowly round

the other drawingroom.

"Yes, I like it; I'm sure I shall. It is a suitable house for old people. You need not laugh. Mrs. Wardell *is* actually old, and I am prematurely old, and no one that is not old, either in years, or, older still, in spirits, has any business here."

"Come, Miss Challys, that won't do. You and your spirits, as you say, are precisely of the same age — each two-and-twenty — and that is very young, and you'll not like isolation long, with the great world and the gay world so near; and you'll find this house, and the monotony you propose, the dullest whim that ever you engaged in."

"Well, that's very much my own affair, I suppose," said she. "Suppose my plan of life ever so absurd, it is worth a trial. I don't love the human race. I have no opinion of my species; I have no cause; and if I am to be happy it must be independently of human society; and, after all, I'm not tied to this house. Should I tire of it, I can take my departure without asking any one's leave — I shall travel. I have half a mind to buy a yacht, and live on the sea, a sea queen, and treat the world as a picture-book — look at its scenery, and cities, and depute my courier to talk with its people."

"A misanthropist?" suggested he.

"No; I don't say that quite," she answered, "but a person who, from experience, has formed no very high or pleasant opinion of her fellow-creatures, and, being her own mistress, means in a harmless way to live as pleases her best, and die an old maid."

"A passionless recluse?" he continued.

"Wrong, again. No, not passionless. With one passion very fixed—very wicked. What do you look at? Why do you laugh?" she demanded a little fiercely. "I say very wicked, not because it *is* wicked, but because the cant of the Pharisee and the cant of the world concur in calling it so. I don't choose to reason; I suppose I could if I chose, but I have no taste for arguing. I leave that to philosophers like you, who always lose their tempers when they engage in it. I read my Bible, and that is my church. I have no notion of being bullied by clergymen. I have gone into various places of worship, both at home and abroad, and I'm not particular about forms. None of them please me exactly, and none of them displease me altogether."

"Ah! Miss Challys," said he, raising his finger, and shaking his head, with a smile, however, "you are the same wild girl — Undine, before she acquired her soul."

"Thank you, Cousin Charles," she answered; "I hope I have not said anything to call for an argument?"

"Because you should have to listen — is that it?"

"Listen! Well, I don't promise that. But I should have to answer it I suppose."

He laughed.

"And I don't see why you need do battle for clergymen. You're not one. There isn't one present — I shouldn't abuse them if there were — and if one can't abuse people behind their backs, I'd like to know where's the liberty of a British subject."

"Very well argued, for a person who, abhors reason," he said, applauding.

"I don't argue. I do despise reason. Our moral nature, instinct, passion, are divine, but reason came by eating of the tree of knowledge, at the persuasion of Satan, and is part of the curse of our Fall, and therefore devilish, and, what is worse, dull. I like this view better still," she said suddenly, as she looked from the back window. "There is so much green — trees and gardens, and I don't object to the stables, and the roofs and chimneys through the leaves — the look-out is so like a country village. I shall make pets of all the birds — but none in cages. If liberty is so much to me, what must it be to them? — poor papa used to say. And I shall have a little King, Charles or two. And where do they sell cats? I must get one of those great foreign cats. I'll have the most magnificent cat that ever was seen in Old Brompton. Every old maid sets up at the sign of the cat, and an old maid I'm going to be, and the sooner we set up the sign of my profession the better. You smile. Very well — you shall see."

"But you talked of a passion just now. It can't be *the* passion?" suggested he.

"Now, that's so like your sex! You poor weak men, when you hear passion spoken of, can imagine nothing but the insipid sentiment you call love. Come, rouse your energies, and be a woman. I require a person of sense and energy, and you must please to get rid of your conventional ideas. You got my letter, of course?"

"Several," he answered.

"I mean about that triumvirate — the attorney, the Jew, and the clergyman."

"Yes, I told your solicitor," said Charles.

"I have no objection to see them, and I preferred seeing them here. When do they come?"

"Tomorrow, at one o'clock, if that quite answers."

"Yes, quite — very good."

"And what do you mean to say to them?" he asked.

"How should I know? Come and hear. That is, I do know perfectly; but I shan't discuss it. I'm sure I'm right, and I don't want to be puzzled."

"Something wicked, as you say, I am sure. I see the wild light of Undine's eye again."

And he wondered mentally what she was going to do in the painful matter in which she was called on to pronounce.

"Well, never was Undine in so dusty a plight. Dear old Mrs. Wardell and I almost quarrelled about the windows and such clouds of dust. So would you mind touching the bell for my maid? I suppose they have got my things upstairs by this time; you come back, do you mind? to tea, or dinner, or whatever it's to be. I hear Cousin Julia coming; she'll tell you."

Cousin Julia Wardell was indeed very audible; for the stairs creaked, and she panted and wheezed, and a shrilly lapdog barked and scampered all the way up.

## CHAPTER II.

### BROTHERS OF MERCY.

"WELL," thought Charles, as he let himself out of the gate, "*this* freak wont last long; an heiress, well connected, and with her beauty! It would be the greatest pity in the world, but the comfort is she'll tire of it in a fortnight, and confess her mistake in a month, and next season she'll come out, and be presented, and have her head turned like the rest."

Charles chose to present this little prediction to himself as his hope — and I think it might more nearly have resembled his fear.

He glanced back with a little sigh, as he closed the gate, and saw a broken view of the fall windows, and glowing old brick, and the weather-worn Caen stone facings.

"Pretty creature she is, but there's some odd want about her; is it feeling or is it only sentiment? — *no* — yet she *is* like Undine without her soul. I always said so — playful, odd, harmless, I think — but also cold, vehement, and wild — a coldness that piques one. She talks so like a fool, too, and yet she has a provoking faculty of thinking."

He did not return that evening to Guildford House. Such, I forgot to mention, was the style of the old-fashioned house in which my young cousin had established herself; but in the morning his breakfast was interrupted by the arrival of a tall footman — inconsistency number one — with a note reminding him that he was to come to her at twelve o'clock, and saying that her solicitor was coming also. But it was plain she would wish to have a kinsman by, although, from an odd wayward pride of hers she would not say so in so many words.

As he walked up the short straight avenue, dark with the shadow of old elms, it was still a quarter of an hour to the appointed time. Already Miss Challys Gray had been busy, and under her beautifying influence tall flowers were nodding and quivering in the great stone pots along the balustrade that ran before the windows, and on the drawingroom windowsills were other tinier flowers, and there he saw her as *I* always see her — looking from the shadow of the open window.

"See, I keep tryst," said he, smiling up, as he held his watch toward her, standing on the steps.

"I can hardly tell at this distance," said she, "though I have pretty good eyes — for seeing with," she interpolated, observing his smile; "but my little clock tells me you are fifteen minutes before your time, so you are very good indeed."

"You've been doing wonders already — such flowers — like the Indian enchanters, who make them grow up in ten minutes," said he.

"You'll find pictures also, and hung with very good taste, I can tell you," she answered with a smile, well pleased that her energy was appreciated.

"Pictures!" said he; "where did you get them?"

"From Gray Forset, and they came last night. Go in, and see Mr. Gryston; you'll find him in the library — the room to the left — and I'll see you there, immediately;" and the pretty head drew back, and nothing but the nodding flowers remained. So in went Charles.

Guildford House was a rather stately old mansion, and really more spacious than from the outside one would have fancied. The hall was a square panelled chamber, with five doors, one facing the hall door, and two opening at either side under those heavy projecting cases, which went out, I believe, with the second George — but which have an air of solid pomp and comfort. Beyond under a broader arch, were visible the wide stairs with their heavy banisters.

When he entered the first room, on the left hand, he found Mr. Gryston reading his Times. He knew that shrewd and reliable attorney, who set down his paper, and seemed tolerably glad to see Charles.

"I thought it was those people about De Beaumirail, he said, glancing at his watch; it isn't quite time, though I think it would be desirable that I should see Miss Gray before they come, and on that account I came a little early. That fellow Levi is a most unscrupulous dog; and Larkin — I've met him once or twice in business, and he's sharp and not very straight; and the fact is, she ought to be cautious what she says — or rather she ought not to say anything, but just leave herself in my bands, d'ye see? and I thought I should have an opportunity of talking to her a little, for I don't know what view she takes, or what she means to do; do you?"

"I have not an idea," Charles answered, truly.

They want her to let him out — they have some object, of course — but I don't see anything we can gain by keeping him in prison. There's that little property in France, it must be trifling, for they say he has very little to live on, and is ready to hang himself, poor devil!"

Charles Mannering did not know much about De Beaumirail. He knew, however, that the Gray family had suffered in more ways than one by his misconduct, and that he was, in the opinion of that family, at least, a very unredeemed *mauvais sujet*. He had lain in prison now for more than three years, refusing to give up some small property which his creditors could not themselves reach. It was in some respects a pitiable case. A young man who had figured some years ago brilliantly in the great world of Paris; he was of old French blood allied by marriage to English; his mother was a Challys, and related distantly to the Grays of Gray Forest.

Born to a great fortune, he had wasted it, in gaming and fabulous extravagance, in seven or eight years, and now he was, at thirty, a despairing prisoner in the London Fleet, with the alternative of ending his days there, or giving up the pittance which alone saved him from the direst penury. Liberty of course was not to be desired at, that price. His creditors had begun to forget him, his relations with them were assuming the character of routine, and the prisoner was subsiding into despair, when a simple old clergyman, named Parker, took up the case, and had succeeded in getting the creditors to agree to his discharge upon very easy terms indeed, and all that was now needed was the consent of the girl, Laura Challys Gray, who represented a very heavy claim for mesne rates and law costs which had accumulated in her father's time.

"I take an interest, of course," said Charles, "but I am quite ignorant of details."

"Miss Gray will be for letting him out very offhand and generous, and I've thought it over, and I can't see any good in keeping him locked up any longer. Even if he did eventually give up that bit of property, I don't think we should be benefited to the extent of three hundred pounds, after all costs paid. But he'll *never* give it up, for he has nothing else to keep body and soul together, and he'll live and die where he is rather than take that step — d'ye see; so I don't see any good in our thwarting her, if she wishes to open the door for him."

Mr. Gryston was a shrewd man, and respected, who knew the city and the profession, and knew something of most persons whom he was at all likely to meet in business.

They had not talked long when the deputation, as they styled themselves, appeared.

Tall, bald Mr. Larkin entered first, with a very well-brushed hat in his large lavender-gloved hand. He had on a lavender-coloured poplin waistcoat and lavender-coloured trowsers, and a perfectly new black frock-coat, that shone with a sleek gloss, and he wore his meek simper, showing gaps at either side, and his pink dovelike eyes glanced this way and that, expecting to see Miss Laura Challys Gray. He liked making a good impression upon rich people, in whom he always saw possible clients.

Mr. Gryston received this gentleman dryly and gravely, with a slight bow; and also the small Jew, Mr. Levi, with the great lurid, vigilant eyes, and sullen dangerous countenance, and black hair, and many trinkets, who followed him closely. This gentleman walked about the room, picking up the books that lay in long rows on the floor, trying the strength of the binding by plucking the covers backward, breathing on the backs and rubbing the gilding with the sleeves of his coat, knocking and scratching the furniture, overhauling the construction of the bookcases, and staring sullenly in the faces of the two or three portraits with which Miss Gray had already hung the walls, with such an expression as one could fancy he might wear while beating down their price in a broker's shop. Charles longed to box his ears and send him about his business, and was on the point of interrupting his scrutiny rather peremptorily, when he suddenly tired of it, and with his hands in his pockets strode over and placed himself beside the agreeable and pious Mr. Larkin, and contributed now and then, uninvited, a drawling sentence to the conversation.

And now entered that venerable and simple clergyman, Mr. Parker, with no trinkets like Mr. Levi, and whose clothes were by no means so new as the unexceptionable Mr. Larkin's.

With light blue eyes, guileless and kindly, he too looked round the room, as he entered with his white locks uncovered. He recognised Mr. Larkin gladly. Charles Mannering introduced himself, and then Mr. Gryston.

"Has Miss Gray arrived?" he inquired.

"Yesterday," answered Mr. Gryston, and looked again at his watch. "She'll be with us here, I expect, in five minutes." He signed to Charles Mannering, and walked to the window, and in a low tone said— "Run up to the drawingroom, please, and give her the caution I intended about Larkin and Levi, and tell her she needn't come down unless she likes; she has only to send me word what her wishes are."

"All right," said Charles, with a nod; but before he reached the door, it opened, and his pretty cousin, in her high-up morning dress, came in. I don't think she knew they were all assembled, for she drew back her foot a little surprised, but immediately advanced, greeted Charles with a smile, and Mr. Gryston, and more gravely and coldly her other three visitors.

Among this little assemblage, in which white heads, and bald heads, and long heads, and very hard heads, were represented, this young and beautiful girl was an incongruous intruder, and perhaps a latent sense of the contrast prompted Mr. Gryston to say —

"I've been here some time, Miss Gray. I thought you might wish a few words, as it is a matter of business, and Mr. Larkin is a professional man" — Mr. Larkin's smile was here one of preternatural innocence and urbanity — "and on the other side, you know — I mean, interested for Mr. Guy de Beaumirail."

"I can hardly, in strictness, claim that honour" — interposed Mr. Larkin, blandly shaking his tall head.

"And it might, perhaps, be as well, Miss Gray," continued Gryston, not minding, "that you should confer with me for a few minutes, before taking any step."

"Thanks — no; it's quite simple, I fancy — done in a word; but I think I had better first hear what these friends of Monsieur de Beaumirail wish to tell me, as they have taken the trouble to come here." She spoke to Mr. Gryston, and glanced graciously at these gentlemen. "Ask them to sit down."

## CHAPTER III.

### AD MISERICORDIAM.

THEY did not sit down, they remained standing, everyone did, Miss Gray included; and Mr. Larkin, in parliamentary phrase, laid upon the table a paper with a series of signatures attached, which he, in his most engaging manner, informed Miss Gray, who stood near the other end of the table, with Gryston at one side and Charles Mannering at the other, was a consent signed by the creditors, for the release of Monsieur de Beaumirail, on the sole condition that their rights were not to be prejudiced by that step.

"I act in this matter, and I believe I may speak for Mr. Levi and his eminent and influential Partner, entirely from motives of compassion, and I will say humanity."

"Humanity — that'sh it — and compassion," echoed. Mr. Levi, standing at his elbow, and eyeing the party with a sulky glare.

"Quite so, a Christian feeling, we hope; that is," said Mr. Larkin, suddenly recollecting Mr. Levi's faith — "a feeling of perfectly disinterested charity and commiseration."

"Commishera-a-tion," assented Mr. Levi, with emphasis.

"And we are actuated," continued Mr. Larkin, "in this, I will say, melancholy case, by no other motive."

"I'll take my oath of that," said Mr. Levi, to place the matter quite beyond doubt.

"And really, thrown professionally into contact with that unhappy though sadly misguided young man, I will say that it is impossible to contemplate his great, and I will add, his — a — a — eminent privations — without a sentiment of pity. 'Sick and in prison' — I take the liberty, Miss Gray, of quoting — 'and ye visited me.'"

"Vishits him twishe a week," — "and always finds him at home," he mentally added. But of course this latter was but an unspoken jocularly of Mr. Levi, who looked especially hang-dog, as he always did when he affected the philanthropic vein.

"Occasionally — just occasionally," said Mr. Larkin, blandly. "We don't make a boast, Mr. Levi, of any humble attentions, or unaffected — a — mitigations it may have been in our power to bestow."

"That'sh as true as the table-book, she help me," said Mr. Levi, with more solemnity than was needed.

Pretty Laura Challys Gray looked at the window with an expression of pain and weariness, as if she would have liked to escape; and as there was a slight pause she said gently —

"Is there anything more?"

And Mr. Gryston ventured to suggest that it would be desirable if Mr. Larkin came to the point.

Whereupon Mr. Larkin "agreed — quite agreed — that feelings, however strong and however unexceptionable," ought not to mix in business, and mentioned the nature of the application he had to make, and also the fact that without exception the other creditors had consented, as their names at the foot of the agreement now on the table attested.

Old Mr. Parker then asked to say a very few words; and he had something to add about the health of the unhappy prisoner, and was solemn, earnest, and pathetic. A little silence followed, during which Mr. Larkin clipped the pen in the ink, and tendered it with a saddened smile and a graceful inclination to Miss Gray.

"I have heard everything now, haven't I?" she asked.

"We have nothing more to add," said Mr. Larkin, engagingly; and with the ends of his long lank fingers he slid the paper gracefully toward the young lady.

Mr. Gryston raised it and read it through, and turned it round and read it a second time; it was very short.

"You quite understand, Miss Gray? The effect of this is to give Mr. Guy de Beaumirail his liberty, but without prejudice to any rights of yours as to any property of his which may hereafter turn up."

He placed the paper before Miss Gray, who looked not at him, but at it, in what is called a "brown study."

"We make a great sacrifice, gentlemen — our detainer amounts to more than half the other creditors' claims put together; but I suppose, — as the others have done it" — and with this pause he presented the pen, which he had taken from Mr. Larkin's fingers, to his young and beautiful client, adding in a lower tone —

"I don't see any objection, Miss Gray, to your putting your name to this."

"But I do," said Miss Gray, in a faint icy voice that had a slight tremor in it, raising her head suddenly. "I wont sign it. I have quite made up my mind, Monsieur de Beaumirail shall remain where he is."

And with two or three little impatient waves of her fingers she put away the pen. There was a silence. Mr. Larkin, staring at her, went on smiling inconsistently. Mr. Levi gaped luridly as if he was going to swear at her. Mr. Gryston glanced shrewdly at her, as if he doubted his ears for a moment, and then looked down demurely on the table, and played the devil's tattoo softly on it; and the clergyman, with his gentle eyes wide open, gazed on her with an alarmed uncertainty. The silence that followed was for a few seconds, but for Mr. Gryston's drumming, intense.

"Bega-a-ad!" boomed at last in the Jew's metallic tones.

Miss Laura placed her hand in her cousin's arm, and said, looking very pale, "Will you take me to the drawingroom? Goodbye," she added, in a low tone; and making a very grave and haughty inclination to the strangers, she drew near the door, which Charles opened for her.

The old clergyman followed quickly in a kind of consternation.

"But, my dear madam — my dear young lady — pardon me — you cannot possibly understand."

"I do, indeed, sir — I understand perfectly; and I wish you and everyone to understand that I have quite made up my mind — that I know the effect of what I do, and that I am — resolved that Monsieur de Beaumirail shall be punished, and my resolution is not to be altered by anything you can possibly say or urge; I am sorry if I give you pain; goodbye."

And with a more gracious farewell to the old clergyman, Miss Laura Challys Gray was gone, and standing at the back drawingroom window, before her audience down stairs had well recovered their surprise.

"You must ask that foolish old clergyman to luncheon, and Mr. Gryston, but on no account either of those dreadful men, the two people with that paper to sign," said Miss Gray to her cousin.

"Don't, pray, call him foolish, Laura," said Charles.

"And why not, pray? He was foolish, and he *is* foolish. No sensible person talks so dogmatically as he did upon things he knows nothing about."

"I thought he spoke with good sense, and good feeling," said her cousin.

"You ought to *know* that he did neither — that is to say, that *I* have acted rightly in utterly despising his advice. I saw you were shocked, and I don't care; and do just go and give my message to that foolish clergyman and Mr. Gryston."

Charles smiled upbraidingly, shook his head and left the room very gravely, thoughtfully even. Laura looked after him over her shoulder a little vexed.

"There goes another fool," she soliloquized. "What does it signify what they think? Nothing, while I'm sure I'm right — and one must be right, morally, at least, when one does from a superior motive that which is perhaps disagreeable to them; though it ought to be pleasant, very pleasant, and even *is* pleasant in a certain way."

Down stairs, the gentlemen passing through the hall, on their way out, heard brilliant and joyous music from the piano in the drawingroom. Mr. Larkin's heart was not very deep in this matter, but the Jew heard this music very sourly. As he walked away, said he to Mr. Larkin —

"Who'd think that young woman, Miss Gray, was such a precious screw? When a woman likes money, doesn't she like it, oh, no! They'll go all the way to the devil and back, for a tizzy. Look there — that young man; where's the good of his four bonesh locked up, to Miss Gray? What devils they are! And she knows he's dying by inches there. What's her income — you know something of it?"

"There's Gray Forest, and the Yorkshire property, and they say a great investment in the funds. It's certainly not less than eleven thousand a year, and people who should know, say it's nearer thirteen," said Larkin.

"And all for that one girl's board, and clothing, living in Old Brompton. Bah! She's a miser, and she'll let that fellow die in quod for the chance of a ha'penny in the pound."

"Very young, as you say, Mr. Levi, for so much severity. I hope it is not covetousness — covetousness, which is idolatry, Mr. Levi."

"You have a nishé bit of money yourself, Larkin," said Mr. Levi; "and they do shay you're fond of it too; you take precious good care of it, and turns in a devilish nishé per-shentage."

"There are plenty of 'buses when we get down to the corner here," said Mr. Larkin, mildly, and with his head rather high. He wished this little Jew snob to understand that there was some distance between him and a gentleman of Mr. Larkin's position.

It was not pleasant having such a fellow hanging on him; it could not be helped though. They had promised to see M. de Beaumirail in his den, with the result of their suit, the success of which they had never doubted. But Mr. Larkin would sit back in the 'bus, and take out some letters and read them diligently, and so guard himself against the disconcerting familiarities of that questionable gentleman with the pretty trinkets and somewhat villanous countenance.

Miss Laura Challys Gray laughed to herself pleasantly, as she played a brilliant air in the old-fashioned drawingroom of Guildford House. The slight pallor which had chilled her beauty at the moment of her passing sentence, as it were, of imprisonment for life on that ill-starred Monsieur de Beaumirail, had been succeeded by the brilliant colour of excitement; and gaily, as a girl going to her first ball, she glided round the room, smiled on her beautiful face in the mirror, glanced at the pictures, then stood at the window looking over the brilliant flowers that trembled in the air, and she saw the old clergyman in the seedy black, with the silken white hair, and thin, sad face, with his cotton umbrella in his hand trudging lonely down the short avenue.

She knocked at the window — he turned — she beckoned, and threw it up — she leaned out and beckoned again, smiling, and when he had reached the step, looking up with his sad wintry face beside the flowers that rose high from the great stone flower-pot on the balustrade, imaging side-by-side the fragile beauty of young life and the bleak melancholy of age, she said —

"Pray excuse me, Mr. Parker, I was so much obliged for your letter. Wont you come in and let me thank you, just for a moment?"

He had raised his hat, and the light breeze blew over his thin white locks, as with his patient smile, looking up, he listened to that beautiful young lady with life before her, and with a gentle bow to her he reentered the house.

"That stupid old man! He has walked all the way, I'm certain, he is so covered with dust, and he's going away without any luncheon!"

When he came up, she again pressed her hospitalities upon him; but he declined. He made an old-fashioned early dinner in his lodgings, and intended the luxury of a seat in a 'bus to the Bank; and after a few words, and a silence, during which the old man fidgeted a little with his hat and umbrella, as if about to take leave, the young lady very gravely opened the following conversation.

## CHAPTER IV.

### M. DE BEAUMIRAIL.

"I'm so Sorry you wont take even a glass of wine — but — I did not wish you to go away without telling you why I refuse to let that wicked man, Monsieur de Beaumirail, out of prison."

The old man was standing; at these words he bowed his head, leaning his hand upon the table. It might be simply an attitude of attention, or it might be that the subject was painful, and that he did not care to look in her face while discussing it.

"I ought to mention," he said, "that the unfortunate young man is a distant relation of my own — so distant as almost to count for nothing. I mention it only lest your ignorance of the circumstance Should affect the spirit of what you are going to say; not that it need be so, for, as I say, the relationship is very remote."

"I have lost my father; I have lost my sister; I stand alone in the world, sir. My father suffered from a complaint under which he might have lived for very many years to come, but his life was cut short by the excitement and anxiety of a wanton attack upon his property. My sister died when I was very young, seven years ago. They called it consumption — it was a broken heart. The lawsuit which hurried my father's death was instituted by a man who snatched at that desperate chance to redeem his fortunes from the ruin in which his selfish prodigality had plunged him. My sister's heart was broken by the same unscrupulous man, who first won her love, and then deserted her, and that cold, frivolous villain was Guy de Beaumirail. You did not know all that, sir, when you wrote and spoke to me as you did."

The clergyman shook his head.

"Certainly not; I knew there had been some litigation. But, whoever may have first moved it, let us remember it was De Beaumirail who suffered, and I must add, that even had I known every circumstance you have mentioned, I should have applied to you in his behalf all the same."

"Then, Sir, you would have taken a great liberty," said Miss Gray, flushing brilliantly.

"I don't mean to argue a case that does not exist, ma'am, but I avail myself of this opportunity to re-open the suit which I ventured to prefer on his behalf."

Miss Laura Challys Gray had taken nothing by her motion, neither did old Mr. Parker by his.

"Really, Sir," she said, "this is too provoking."

"Admitting that you have had provocation, my dear young lady, remember that you are bound to love them that hate you, to do good to them that despitefully use you and persecute you, to bless them that curse you."

"Twaddle, sir — as you misapply and pervert the words — twaddle and nauseous cant. How *can* you talk so?" said the young lady, changing colour rapidly.

"Oh, my dear Miss Gray, oh, pray, you don't seem to reflect how very shocking such language is," said the old clergyman.

"You don't seem to reflect, sir, how very shocking yours is! what a perversion of the Bible! We are told to discriminate between the wicked and the good; we are told to have natural affections; we are told to have common sense, and common fairness, and common decency; to honour our parents, and not, that I remember, to honour their murderers."

"My dear ma'am, the obligations of charity are immense; read Saint Paul — read his first epistle to the Corinthians, the thirteenth chapter; read the sermon on the Mount, the sixth chapter of Saint Matthew."

"I know it all, Sir; I know the Bible as well as anyone need; but it is not to be read all at one side; reconcile your blind charity with Saint Paul's command, that he that will not work, neither shall he eat; and if any man, being a professed Christian, be also a sinner, we are commanded to let him be accursed, and to avoid him as if he had the plague. Sir, your distortion of our reasonable faith is a blunder; it is imbecile, and not only imbecile, but wicked; and if I thought you represented Christianity truly, I should cease to be a Christian. I am sorry I have detained you; I expected to find you accessible to reason, and I have found you a clergyman — exactly — exactly a clergyman, and I feel very like a fool, sir, and — and I've only to say, goodbye."

So, for his sound doctrine this old gentleman received a sound jobation, and the beautiful young lady, the spoilt child, looked wonderfully brilliant, and handsome, as she blew him up. With a bow, and a faint sad smile of patience — not put on, quite unconscious — he drew towards the door, and without more parley, disappeared.

"We are both fools, but he's the oldest," she said, in soliloquy, with the same carmine tint in her cheeks. "And now he's gone to shake off the dust from his feet, and plenty of dust he has got there — for a testimony against me." She looked at her watch. It was later than she thought. She touched the bell, and ordered up her cousin, Charles Mannering, from the library. She complained of the clergyman, and commanded Charles, as it were, to agree with her. But Charles, on the contrary, took the other side — very quietly, at first, but more spiritedly, as she urged him. She was very much vexed — more than she quite cared to show.

"When you have quite finished your lecture, tell me, and I shall tell you its effect."

"I hope I have not been very impertinent," said he, a little awkwardly, as he stood by the window and plucked a little blossom from one of the flowers that stood there. "I should not have mentioned the subject — I should not have ventured, only that you asked my opinion."

"I did not give you leave to pluck my flowers though, and that's of more consequence than anything you have said," she observed, a little angrily.

"Oh! I really wasn't thinking. I'm so sorry," and he placed the little sprig gently on the table.

"And you two gentlemen might as well have spared your eloquence. It is pleasant, though one knows one is right, to have people to agree with us. But *we* disagree about everything, I think; not that it matters much, for it has not the slightest effect; that vain, worthless man shall be punished, with God's help, while I am spared to punish him; and your tiresome sophistries and platitudes have no effect but to heighten the disgust with which I have been always accustomed to hear you men support one



another, through thick and thin, in all your enormities and oppressions, provided they have been directed against my miserable sex. I'm going out for a drive with Mrs. Wardell; and I shan't much mind if I don't see you again till this day week."

With which rude speech she left the room. Charles picked up the little flower he had laid on the table, and smelled at it once, and twice, absently, although it had no perfume; and twiddled it in his finger and thumb for a little, feeling indistinctly very much annoyed with his pretty cousin; much more vexed, in fact, than I think he would have been had she not been so pretty; and away went he under censure, like the clergyman.

"This day week — well, perhaps so, though this day fortnight may answer me as well; better, by Jove," said he, as he drove sulkily along Piccadilly towards his club.

In a dingy room in the Fleet, about the same time, a young man in slippers and dressing-gown, without a necktie, pale, utterly *ennuié*, with a long beard that added a premature gravity to the dejection of his face, nipped his lip with his teeth, with a frown of sudden pain as he listened to the close of Mr. Larkin's polished statement, heard his gentlemanlike condolences on their failure, and the metallic drawl of Mr. Levi as he contributed his share to the dolorous and vengeful duo.

The old clergyman was looking out upon the listless yard through a window which wanted cleaning. A silence followed the close of the dismal narrative. The Jew sat down and made half-a-dozen notes in his pocketbook, and totted a sum or two, and pulled out some letters.

Mr. Larkin being a polite person, and, as he liked reminding people, a gentleman, awaited with considerate attention the remarks which such a narrative might not unnaturally draw from a person in Mr. Guy de Beaumirail's situation.

That gentleman looked down on the agreement which lay upon the table, with the same sharp frown, drawing the paper toward him, and he drew his finger slowly down from signature to signature in a dreamy despair — there were so many; he had come so near his liberty — within one name. A pencil line was drawn where that talismanic name was to have been written, and with the same pencil thoughtful Mr. Larkin had traced the words "Miss Gray will have the goodness to sign *here*." De Beaumirail sighed heavily as his finger traced the descending file of names till it reached Mr. Larkin's inscription, and there it stopped, and gradually a strange smile, weary, patient, bitter, lighted up his pale face.

Mr. Larkin "hem'd" slightly to remind him that he was at hand and attentive. But notwithstanding this inducement, silence continued until that painful smile had slowly waned, and De Beaumirail, with his hands in his pockets, shuffled lazily to the clumsy old sofa, covered with faded red stuff, laid down with tarnished brass-headed nails, that stood at the far end of the room, and he took the arm of this in his hand, as if he was trying its strength with a tug or two; and, said he, in a low tone —

"The wretch! I hope to God she may cry for mercy yet, and die without it."

And De Beaumirail, with this brief soliloquy, threw himself down on the sofa, with his face to the wall, and lay there at his listless length.

Tall Mr. Larkin looked with his pink eyes at the clergyman, and slowly shook his tall, bald head, and red whiskers, and raised his large hand in religious pain.

Then Mr. Levi and he talked a little in murmurs by the window, about another matter, and the attorney and he appointed a meeting for next day; and soon, the good old clergyman finding himself alone with Monsieur de Beaumirail, accosted him mildly, as he lay on the sofa —

"You must allow me to say, my dear young friend, that I heard what you said, with pain; your words were not Christian."

"They were as Christian as I meant them to be," said De Beaumirail without moving.

"It is a sad disappointment," said the clergyman.

Silence followed this remark.

"It is, indeed, a great blow."

De Beaumirail made no comment,

"So young and so wealthy, yet insisting upon extreme rights with so much severity, and in a very vengeful spirit. I have been deeply disappointed," said the old man.

Still no answer came.

"Sir, I deplore it — I feel for you deeply — it is, indeed, a blow!" and after a pause added, a little hesitatingly —

"If I thought you would wish me, in this trying hour, to pray, or even to read with you —"

"I thank you, no — I'll try a cigar instead, and a saunter round the court."

## CHAPTER V.

### BEYOND THE PRECINCTS OF GUILDFORD HOUSE.

GUILDFORD HOUSE missed a visitor next day. Its sober red brick and Caen stone, and its short dark files of rugged elms, saw not the passing shadow of Charles.

He had "sulked." He was quite high with his pretty cousin. He was lonely and short-tempered, but he didn't wish to go near her, and mightn't for many a day. But the day after, a little note reached him, asking, "Where *have* you been, or what have you been doing? Have you forgotten us quite, or why should I have the trouble of writing? Don't you remember there are fifty things to be done, and what are you good for if not to consult with? Pray do come immediately. I do want a little advice about tradesmen and other things, and especially about hanging the other pictures. When we are a little settled, and have entered on the regular humdrum life we propose, you shall have leave of absence — a long one, if you insist; so comfort yourself with that hope, and in the meantime help us poor women in our loneliness."

"Capricious, disingenuous, impudent — what a sex they are! If I did right, I shouldn't go, I suppose — but is it worth a quarrel?" said Charles, very much pleased, I think; and he arrived in the 'bus at the corner next Guildford House more promptly than was, perhaps, strictly dignified, under the circumstances of his sudden recall.

So his friendly relations were restored, and their conversation was untroubled by an allusion to Guy de Beaumirail. The fuss of settling was nearly over, and as things began to subside into that humdrum in which Miss Laura Challys Gray chose to discover, for the present, the secret of human happiness, she began, he fancied, to grow already ever so little weary of the half-conventual and (according to the "arcadian" portrayed in Dresden china) half-arcadian simplicity of life in which she had embarked.

"Well, Miss Challys, a little slow, isn't it?"

"Slow! Life's always slow, if you mean dull; but this is nothing like so stupid as living in a round of balls, concerts, and kettledrums. I saw *that* for half a season; an interval of quiet has saved me, and nothing on earth shall ever tempt me back again into that enervating and headaching intoxication.

"You'll not endure it long," insisted Charles, with a smile.

"You don't, however, fancy that I'm quite a fool," she said, "and no one but a fool could think of living without either occupation or amusement. I shall, soon find both for myself; there are many things to be seen."

"And some people," suggested Charles. "I suppose you'll see your relations?"

"Well, yes, some of them, I must, I suppose. But there's no need to be in any great hurry. I sometimes think I might very well wait till they find me out; and in this wilderness of London, I might be hidden for a long time."

I know you are a misanthrope, you told me so; but are the Ardenbrokes and the Mayfields on your black list; wont they think it very odd your avoiding them?"

"I shan't avoid them. I like them, on the contrary; but there are times when one prefers postponing even what they like, and I think I should wish to dream away a few months of my life in this place first; just to try my experiment fairly."

Here was a silence. She had set Charles down to a little task of copying a song. She had laid down her work, and, leaning back in her chair, looked out of the window through the flowers. It was a listless hour.

"I call it an experiment, my good friend Charles, because you are pleased to be satirical upon the subject, and I was in a cowardly mood, I suppose. But it isn't an experiment. I mayn't like this life very much; but every day I feel a greater reluctance to enter upon the other — that gay world, the season, and all that. I saw quite enough of it to know that it is insincere, cold, unmeaning, and does not suit me; my idea of life is quite different. It must not be all simper, glare, and headache. Let the groundwork be a good, broad, neutral tint, like this sober existence, on which such sober lights as I may care to throw shall tell with the brilliancy of contrast; above all, let me be free — the liberty to do as I please — live how I like, and go where I list — my birthright — my liberty — to think of selling it for such a mess as that insipid and reckless world can offer!"

Charles looked up from his music and smiled.

"I'm quite in earnest — why do you smile?"

"Exactly *because* you are in earnest," he replied.

"A little oracular, arn't you? — but I see you are amused at the profundity of my self-delusion; you shall see; wait a little; you don't know half."

Charles was very much pleased, I think, at those sober resolves, and I fancy that it was his secret apprehension that they would never bear the strain of surrounding temptation that made him affect to treat her professions so slightly.

"I forget — let me see — where am I to take you to-day? Oh, yes, the ancient armour — the exhibition of water-colours; — and you said you'd look in again at West-Minster Abbey, and there was something else; but don't you think you are pretty sure to light on some of your people in some of these expeditions?"

"'Sufficient to the day.' I dare say I shall — so much the worse — well, and what follows?"

"Nothing particular; only it might be as well that you should call or report yourself, as be found out."

"Now, do pray be quiet — you're growing such a tease — you have no idea — and it is so stupid. Let them find me out, if they must — I'll not go to their parties, and if they grow seriously troublesome it is very easy to go somewhere else — just as easy as it was to come here; besides, you fancy my plans are all whims and caprices. When the truth is, I have no spirits — no energy — and a positive dislike of nearly everyone — and a genuine horror of all that sort of thing you fancy I secretly like. I can't prevent your thinking — if so, it must be — that I am telling stories; but, remember this, I never told a lie in my life, and anyone who tells me an untruth, I *never* forgive; and that sort of thing would, you know, of itself disqualify me for all the amenities of human society."

"Here's the carriage, I think;" he interrupted, as I heard the iron gate swing back, and the roll of the wheels.

"So it is; and where is Julia Wardell? Oh! there — walking up and down before the steps."

So they went out, and had their drive, and saw their sights, and did their shopping, Charles dutifully accompanying them; and he came back again with them, and dined at Guildford Hall, and drank tea there.

"What are we to do tonight, Cousin Julia — how are we to pass the evening?" inquired Miss Gray, who delegated the prerogative of thinking to her fat chaperon.

"Well, dear, anything. What do you say? You don't like cards."

"I don't know how to play — I think I shall learn some time or other. I do know how to play 'beggar-my-neighbour' — but that's all. What do you say, Charles?"

"I say this — and I'm sure Mrs. Wardell will support me — that enjoying good music and the opera, as you do, you ought to take a box for the remainder of the Season, and go there whenever you feel inclined — it will do you good."

"Immense good," acquiesced fat Mrs. Wardell, who, though she liked her sly nap in the evening in her cushioned chair, had also a liking for what she called a little "refined amusement" now and then. "Immense good! and I'll tell, you why," she exclaimed, with an enthusiasm which cost her a fit of coughing, by which the remaining argument or exhortation was lost to the world.

"I don't see why I shouldn't — I think the opera is quite within my conventual vow; there is just the objection that friends may see me, and fancy they are obliged to make me out-but I can reconnoitre carefully before coming to the front, and I need not be much in evidence."

"Then, you authorize me?"

"Yes. Shall I?"

"Certainly," answered Charles.

"You'll say I'm inconsistent — I know you will — and it will be very treacherous if you do," said she.

"But I'll do nothing of the kind; on the contrary, I shall be very glad."

"Because," she continued, "you advised it, remember; and, after all, it is merely transporting our little party to a smaller room, where we can listen to good music, and may be as much to ourselves as here."

"Then I am commanded by you to do the best I can tomorrow? We can get a box for tomorrow, and see how you like it."

"Well, yes — you may; and I'm glad you advise it. I think, after my vows of solitude, I should have been half ashamed to hint at it, so soon at least; but I've begun to have an uncomfortable kind of presentiment — I don't know what it is — an anticipation, an omen."

As she spoke she got up and sat by the window, looking out on the short, dark double row of trees, through whose rugged stems the moonbeams crossed.

"I know that kind of thing," said fat Mrs. Wardell plaintively; "I have experienced it, my dear — and in my case it was always followed by some affliction, particularly once," and she touched her handkerchief to her eyes.

"But I won't believe in omens," said Laura Gray; "and after all, I don't see that there is any form in which grief can well reach me now; of course I may die like anyone else, but this is not the sort of apprehension."

Mrs. Wardell touched the cushion beside her, and her little dog obeyed the signal, and she, in murmurs, and the dog in snarls, carried on a dialogue; while Charles followed his pretty kinswoman to the window, and in a tone accordant with the moonlight hour, asked with a smile —

"And what *is* your terrible presentiment?"

"I begin to think it *is* better having something of that kind to occupy one — to look forward to," said Miss Gray, half thinking, half answering him. "I have felt so oddly — I'm sure its nervous — a kind of fancy that I am — how shall I describe it? — watched — well, not exactly watched — a kind of feeling that I am going to meet somebody — I don't know whom — whom I have never seen, perhaps, except in a dream, or somehow," she laughed, "in a preexistent state, a kind of expectation mixed very largely with fear. And, of course, you and I know that the whole thing is purely nervous."

"But how do you mean *watched* — have you any reason to suspect any such thing? I'd like to see anyone presuming — —"

"No; there's no cat looking at the king or queen, that I know of," said Miss Gray; "and *apropos* of cats, you have not brought me the cat you promised — and an old maid without her cat is a witch without her familiar — and pray do choose me one of those huge creatures. I should so like one of those splendid northern tigresses."

"My darling Laura, you're not really going to bother Mr. Mannering about a cat. You haven't an idea what odious animals they are!" exclaimed Mrs. Wardell, who thought it might not contribute to the comfort of her lapdog.

"I had not an idea you heard me, Julia, darling. But there's no contending with instinct; unlike you, I'm going to be, as I said, an old maid — and so the invincible affinity between me and those demure and comfortable animals — so reserved, so querulous, and with such nice little claws, on occasion."

"I'm sure you're not serious," said Mrs. Wardell, with a lurch towards her lapdog on the cushion. "No; she would not, she couldn't be so cruel as to bring in a great big beast to the housey-wousey — to eat up poor little darling, precious Scampscums, that its old mother doats upon!"

And the dog, with a sympathetic wriggle, playfully snapped at her nose, which, with an adoring smile, she had approached perhaps incautiously near. A squeak of alarm from Julia Wardell, and a shrill bark from the charming animal, and then a torrent of endearments from its fat and indulgent "mother," as she termed herself, closed the little episode.

And now their early evening drew to a close, and Charles Mannering took his leave; and he had hardly gone when the postman knocked. He left a letter, from which seemed gradually to germinate, as from a bulb, a living stem of romance that bore its sombre boughs, its blossoms, and its strange fruit, and gradually cast an inexplicable gloom upon her life.

## CHAPTER VI.

### A DIAMOND LOCKET.

"HOW very late for a letter!" said Miss Gray, who was thinking of going to her room. "I have only had four since we came here. A letter is quite an event — and this comes so late! Oh, here it is."

And the servant brought her a square letter, addressed with a broadnibbed pen, and a firm hand, which she did not know, to "Miss Gray, Guildford House, Old Brompton."

She turned this letter round curiously. She had not six correspondents in the world. All her letters of business went direct to Mr. Gryston. This autograph she had certainly never seen before. It was a bold, rather large hand.

The letter contained a small enclosure — a coin, perhaps — and was sealed in black wax, with a very odd device. The motto said, in French, "Choose which dart," and represented Cupid with his arrow drawn to the bead at one side, and, at the other, Death with his javelin brandished — a small, but very distinct and beautifully cut seal. Solitude and monotony form the discipline which prepares the nerves for odd impressions, and Laura Challys Gray was predisposed toward that vague superstition which has more to do with the nerves than reason.

It was a London letter, dropped in a West-end office; and this also troubled her. Her retreat had been discovered — and so soon! With a growing anticipation of something disagreeable, and a wish that it had never come, she glanced again at the bold, distinct character of the address, and at the hurried, blotted monogram — now undecipherable — which was traced in the corner. Was it a monogram or only an accidental mark? She could not make it out, but she thought it was a blotted monogram.

Her intuitive misgiving postponed the moment of certainty, and when Mrs. Wardell asked —

"Well, Laura, dear, what does it say?"

She answered —

"Don't ask me now, dear. I should hate to open it. Some stupid thing, I dare say, that should have gone to Mr. Gryston. We can read it at breakfast. It's from no one that we know."

When she got to her room she laid it, still unopened, on her table; and it was not until her maid had gone that, unable to resist longer, she opened it.

It contained an enamelled gold locket, very prettily set in brilliants. It was not new; it had lain long in the piece of tissue paper that was wrapped round it, and was a little tarnished. It contained some very silken, dark brown hair, a little like her own; and on the other side some interlaced initials were engraved, which she did not stop to decipher.

The writing in the letter was in the same hand, but much smaller and more elegant than that upon the envelope.

It spoke thus: —

"MISS LAURA CHALLYS GRAY, — You will never know more of me than I chose to disclose. That, for certain reasons, shall be little. I observe, with admiration and respect, how, with firmness and justice beyond your years, you have answered the application of De Beaumirail. You remember your father; you remember your sister — I know not for what purpose, if not to subvert the ends of justice, our affections were made strong enough to outlive the frail beings to whom they were dedicated. The retribution is virtuous — persist! This locket, which I once had thoughts of giving to a degraded kinsman, De Beaumirail, contains your dead sister's hair. Deserve my goodwill. Go where you will, my eye is upon you. Do what you will, my hand can reach you. Those who know it not are not to learn from you, that De Beaumirail is a prisoner. He is *almost*, and shall be utterly forgotten. What am I — man or woman — young or old — kind or malignant — whence come I — whither go I? With respect to you, the writer is a *shadow* — a shadow, however, that if your path be crooked will cross it."

"A weak invention of the enemy," said Miss Laura Challys Gray, making her quotation with an uncomfortable smile. "The enemy! But what enemy have I, except, I suppose, that wicked De Beaumirail? and this, certainly, is no friend of his."

She read the letter through again.

"What a piece of melodrama! The idea of trying to frighten a sane person with such rubbish!"

She examined the seal again and again, tried to make something of the little scribble in the corner, and, standing in her slippers and dressing-gown, read the whole thing through once more.

"It's a mere hoax! Who can it be? It certainly is not Charles Mannerling. There is no one but Ardenbroke," she thought. "It must be he — but, oh no. I forgot the allusion to my sister and father. And this little locket — no; that's quite out of the question."

What a contemptible thing," she murmured, sitting down in a great chair by the fireplace. "How ridiculous! What an idea the writer must have of me, to fancy I should be frightened or influenced by such a device."

She looked down at, the slipper in which her tiny foot was tapping the floor; and then looking up, smiling, she said —

"And what a fool I am to think for a moment about it. I would tear it into little bits but that I may chance to trace the author by the writing, and I half doubt whether it is worth sparing till tomorrow morning."

She was more interested by it, however, than she was quite aware, and more alarmed. It seemed, little by little, to her exaggerated fears, that the privacy of her life was gone, a secret eye watching her intensely, and an undetected and possibly potent influence interfering with her daily life. "Kind or malignant" — here, at all events, were evidences of an unaccountable interest in her doings, of the accuracy with which the writer was informed, and the malignant pretensions with which he or she affected to control her conduct. She was growing more uncomfortable.

When she lay down she could not sleep, but lay awake in excited conjecture. Every theory she framed broke down. Sometimes it seemed that her own servants were spies upon her; sometimes that the simple old clergyman had unwittingly made a confidant of some masked enemy of De Beaumirail's.

But these conjectures gave place, and failed one after the other, and left her with the uneasy sense of being watched by an unseen eye — a vague suspicion and constraint that gathered strength as the minutes passed, and assured her that her solitude was false.

On the table by the fireplace lay the letter, and on it the locket, which, amid the dark thoughts that gathered about her, glimmered with a sinister brilliancy in the distant light which she had left burning on her dressing-table. In the obscure light, that little glimmering circle simulated to her fancy the steady eye that observed her, and associated with the relic of her dead sister, helped to wring her girlish imagination with a strange pain.

She was glad she had preserved the letter. She was resolved to find out who wrote it. She would consult her friends; she would charge Gryston with it; she would place it in the hands of the London detectives; she would lose her life but she would discover the author of the letter — and, what then?

“Well, it can’t be legal, for it is certainly cowardly and wicked to try and frighten poor creatures like me with anonymous letters. If the laws permit *that* sort of thing, pretty laws we live under!”

## CHAPTER VII.

### ROBERT LE DIABLE.

BEHOLD our little party installed in the box which had been promptly secured in the name of Miss Gray, Guildford House, Old Brompton.

"Something a little triste. I always thought, in the aspect of this great house — I mean, compared with a theatre; these little curtained pigeon-holes, real boxes, partitioned, and dim — very splendid, the *coup d'œil*, a sort of oriental richness — superb and luxurious, but also a little gloomy," said Miss Gray.

She was leaning back in her chair, and making a cautious survey of the long sweep of boxes, which were beginning to be inhabited.

"I wish one could see without being seen. Have the Ardenbrokes a box?"

"Yes, over there; no one in it," said Charles. "You have found out some one you know — haven't you?"

"Have I? Where?" said Miss Gray, lowering her glasses, and looking at him.

"Somewhere over there; haven't you?" said he.

"Oh! Perhaps so," she answered, with a smile and a little shrug. "I had better look again."

And she did turn her glasses in the direction he indicated, and he saw them again linger, he fancied, at the same point in their circuit. It was at a box where sat two gentlemen, whose appearance had already struck him.

One was an elderly man, with a long, close-cropped, gray head, gray whiskers, and well-waxed moustache of the same colour, whose white-gloved hands, folded together, rested on the edge of the box, as, with a grave face, rather apathetic, and with features commonplace, insignificant, but on the whole grim, he looked steadily towards the stage. The other was a singularly handsome and elegant-looking young man, with dark hair moustache, and small peaked beard in the Italian style, an oval face, and large soft eyes, and delicately pencilled eyebrows. This face was very feminine. There was colour in the cheeks, and a soft lustre in those large eyes, with their long lashes, and a soft carmine touched the lips. The waving hair lay low upon a very white forehead. Altogether, the tints and formation of the face were feminine and delicate, and there was something of fire and animation, too, that gave it that kind of beauty that belonged to the great Italian tenor in his young days.

When Charles Mannerling's glasses rested on this face, it was with an unpleasant feeling — a little pang of scarcely conscious jealousy — an intuition of antagonism. He was standing behind Miss Gray, and, stooping as he lowered his glasses, he said with an unreasonably bitter feeling —

"There are two fellows over there. Did you observe them? An old gray man who seems to have come to hear the opera, and a young man — such a specimen of a man-milliner! He seems to have painted under his eyelashes, and put on some rouge. He certainly has, and he has done nothing since he came in but stare at all the women in the house. He'll get himself a precious good kicking if he doesn't take care." So spoke Charles, and affected a little laugh.

"I don't think I've seen anyone answering that description," said she, indifferently.

"Oh! you *must* have observed him. You won't deny it, you who hate anything that resembles — what shall I say? — a concealment."

"I know whom you mean, perfectly, but you don't describe him," she laughed.

"How do you know, then?" he asked drily.

"A caricature is not a description, and yet it may indicate a person, and you forget that you have helped me by mentioning that old man with the long gray head. Well, tell me — what is it?"

"What is *what*?" inquired Charles.

"Weren't you going to tell me something about them?"

"I? Story, Lord bless you, I have none to tell. Interesting subject, no doubt; but I was merely thinking how like a girl in masquerade he is."

"I don't agree with you. I think his figure so manly — manly and elegant."

"Oh! I spoke of his face."

"I think him very handsome — he is handsome — I don't say exactly in the style I admire, but you must see that he is. Hush! We are going to have that divine tenor again. Oh! isn't that voice angelic?"

This night there were selections from two operas. The scenes from "La Sonnambula" had closed. In the interval between it and those that followed from "Robert le Diable," the people in Miss Gray's box, who had talked now and then during the singing, grew perversely silent. Most persons whose spirits are, at all capricious have at times experienced in a theatre something like the sensation which that young lady on a sudden felt just now. A sudden air of desolateness seemed to overspread the stage; an idea of cavernous solitudes beyond, half-lighted and silent, made the scene joyless and unreal; the illusion failed; imagination and the spirits collapsed together; the music sounded jaded and forlorn; the lights grew less light, and fancy and enjoyment chilled.

The descent of the curtain did not dissipate this odd depression; she leaned back; the whole scene had lost its interest. "It comes from over there — this influence comes from that singular looking person. Such strange beauty, such brilliant intelligence, and yet such a gleam of malevolence as sometimes looks half fiendish — *he* is the writer of that letter enclosing the locket with poor, darling Maude's hair; and that horrid old man beside him, so stiff and apathetic, who has never turned his head once, or changed a muscle of his gray face, and whose arm moves as if it was made of wood, he looks as if he were dead, and just animated for this occasion. I wish so much I had not come."

This young lady, looking apathetically forward over the heads of the distant people in the stalls, over the footlights, to the line where the gray boards and the curtain meet, is conscious of those images which disturbed her, reflected obliquely on her eye —

that brilliant, malignant young man; that cadaverous old one. Had these two figures and faces in reality all that sinister character with which they seemed to present themselves to her? Not one particle, possibly. I can't tell. Miss Laura Challys Gray had a fancy highly excitable, and sometimes sombre. An intuition, fancied or real, told her that the young man in the box at the other side was the author of that letter, which, in spite of every effort, troubled her more and more. And from this one speck, gradually rose and spread that darkness through which she saw all things changed.

This Robert le Diable did not find in that house a spectator so predisposed to receive in good faith the whole melodramatic impression of that great churchyard scene. The peaks and shafts of the ruined abbey, glimmering in moonlight, the terrible necromantic basso, and the sheeted phantoms, all but a moving picture — had yet a relation to real emotions which circumstances and fancy had already set in motion within her; and Miss Gray, to whom accident made the opera and all such scenic glamour still new, gazed on in the sort of eerie rapture with which she might have read, for the first time, in the solitude of her room, the ghostly scene in the "Lay of the last Minstrel" in the aisle of Melrose Abbey.

Had Charles suspected how rapt and thrilled she was, he would, no doubt, have smiled, notwithstanding his preoccupation. She was absorbed—music, scene, and figures, all blended in one solemn, supernatural impression that was for her quite genuine. Leaning back again, with a sigh, as if something drew her, without thinking, she turned her glasses unconsciously on the box where these people sat. The effect was startling.

Through her glasses she saw, it seemed but four feet removed, straight before her, the person of whom she had been thinking so disagreeably. That young man held his glasses on the edge of the box in both hands, as if he had but that moment lowered them. The sensation was as if their eyes at that short distance had met. His were directed on her with a steady, stern, and penetrating gaze, that seemed to hold her fixed for a moment — his face lighted with a faint smile of recognition.

With a kind of start she turned her glasses away, and carried them slowly on a feminine effort to conceal the effect of that accidental encounter over a space so wide. She felt her cheeks, her very throat and forehead flush intensely, and then a chill and pallor came. There seemed to her a character of menace in that smile, and she felt that she was detected, and probably her thoughtless look misinterpreted.

She could have cried with vexation and terror. She had not time to reflect what a fool she was. A vague suspicion, however, of the light in which others might view her uneasiness about the whole occurrence, and some other feelings, had made her lock the letter and the locket up, and evade good Mrs. Wardell's inquiries in the morning. That was her first secret.

At this moment she felt so uncomfortable and disconcerted that she would gladly have got up and left her place. She did not wish to talk over her folly with other people; her reluctance to divulge to old Mrs. Wardell, and to Charles, the odd occurrence of yesterday evening, had grown upon her, and was now insurmountable; and Challys Gray had a scornful hatred of even the smallest and most harmless untruths, which unfitted her, a good deal, as she felt for the benevolences of the world.

In the meantime Charles, whom the handsome unknown had also impressed as disagreeably, though quite in a different way, again looked at him from his less prominent post of observation.

The young man who had excited the contempt of Charles still occupied more of his attention than the opera. He fixed his glasses on him for a moment, with a stern countenance. He was, indisputably, in a certain style, the handsomest fellow he had ever seen; the outline was, as he said himself, almost feminine. The tints were those of a rich enamel; and, to crown all, not only had Challys Gray observed him, but he had detected the glasses of the unknown in her direction more than once. It was very provoking. The thought that he had been the person to persuade his fair kinswoman to come here also soured him.

"I don't know how it is," he thought, "that fellow has the air of an adventurer — a charlatan."

As he opened this vein of suspicion, however, he saw Lord Ardenbroke enter the box of the unknown, place his hand with a kind smile gently on the young man's arm, and shake him by the hand, as he turned about smiling, also. So that suspicion was exploded.

It certainly was Lord Ardenbroke, there could be no mistake about that, and they were chatting together, as it seemed, in a very friendly way.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### ALFRED DACRE.

"YOU are *now* pretty sure to be found out," said Charles.

"Has any one come in?" asked Miss Gray.

"Over there," said Charles, with a glance and a little nod, indicating the box at the opposite side.

"Why — what do you mean?" asked Miss Gray, with a slight change of colour.

"Your cousin, Lord Ardenbroke, has just made his appearance, and he's talking to that ladylike young gentleman about whom we so nearly quarrelled just now."

"I don't remember the quarrel, but is Ardenbroke really there?"

She was resolved not to look again in that direction.

"He is really in high chat, and they seemed very glad to see one another."

"If I am to be discovered, there's no one I should rather be found out by; he's so goodnatured, and so pleasant."

She almost hoped he might see her and come across, so intensely curious had she become to learn something about that young man. If she could only be certain that he was not the writer of the anonymous letter which made her so restless, she would never think of him more. It was that fanciful association that connected him with that disguised communication, that made him so interesting.

In the meantime what had passed between Lord Ardenbroke and the charlatan of Charles's dream, and the avenger of Miss Challys Gray's?

"It's an age since we met," said Lord Ardenbroke.

"Five years — *six* years, so it is. I did not think you could have known me. I hadn't this" — he touched his small peaked beard as he spoke — "and wore my hair long — do you remember — like young France, and I fancied I was so changed."

"I never forget a face," said Lord Ardenbroke. "And how long have you been in this part of the world, and what have you been doing these hundred years?"

"I've been all over the world, and doing everything, and I'm here in London upon a very secret affair — diplomatic, shall I say? I can't tell you yet, I'll call it a — what? — a secret mission" — he laughed a little — "and I know you'll not be vexed, but I must ask you to do me this kindness, not to mention that I've been here, I mean in this town of yours, to any living creature. I might, I'm quite serious, get into a very awkward scrape, if it were known, and you'll promise."

"Certainly; no one shall hear a word of it from me," said Lord Ardenbroke.

"I see, you don't know what to make of me," said this young man, with a smile, perhaps the least degree in the world embarrassed, "but you shall, no one before you; I only wish I could tell you all about it now, you could give me counsel well worth having, but the truth is, the secret isn't mine — it is quite other people's."

"I shan't say I saw you," said Lord Ardenbroke, with a grave and quiet decision, "but would there be the least use in asking you to come to us tomorrow?"

"No," said the young man, with a smile and a shake of the head, "nothing would give me greater pleasure, but I can't go anywhere."

"Well, I was afraid you couldn't, from what you said; but you'll be coming back, I hope, soon, more your own master, and then I'll not let you off."

The young man smiled and thanked him.

"I've given up music, except my own miserable singing, for my private entertainment (he laughed), for years. I used to live in the opera, but one changes."

"You draw, and paint still, of course?"

"No, I've given that up also; one tires of everything at last, except — there's one pursuit I still do enjoy. I studied Lavater, you remember, or you forget, but I did, and I think it an inexhaustible science, and I've been exercising my craft on a face this evening, and it has rather interested me."

"Oh! and where is this face?"

"Over there."

"By Jove!" exclaimed Lord Ardenbroke, looking in the direction of Miss Gray's box, I'm so glad! why that's — — "

"Don't tell me who, pray, just for a moment; she's good-looking, as we all see."

"Very."

"She's agreeable."

"Yes."

"And altogether, you'd say of her, She's — — "

"Charming."

"Ha! she's worth punishing."

"How? What do you mean?"

"Am I to speak quite plainly, in my character as philosopher, physiognomist, psychologist?"

"By all means."

"Well, that girl's a devil."

"Isn't that very strong?" and Lord Ardenbroke laughed a little.

"I mean it; I could show you the lines and proportions in that, I may say, lovely face that quite settle the point; she is a fiend if you place her in certain relations."



"What sort of fiend?"

"Cruel."

"You are quite wrong," said Lord Ardenbroke.

The physiognomist laughed.

"You are, I assure you."

"That's because you fancy that cruelty and malice are inseparable. She has no malice, and yet she is diabolically cruel. Recollect, I know absolutely nothing of her past life, and nothing of her character except what my art reveals. But that art is infallible, you'll find I'm right."

"I shall be very sorry," said Lord Ardenbroke with a smile, "and till then I must venture to question your mode of divination."

"You don't fancy that the people who burnt heretics in Smithfield, were more ill-natured than others; they were simply stupid on a certain point — now *there's* a face quite beautiful, but it shows a capability, not a habit, of intense narrowness, intense obstinacy, and intense violence — she has imagination also. She might be in certain situations a character bigoted and terrible. There are fine qualities also — very, but I shan't trouble you with them. But, because she has so many fine attributes, I repeat, she is worth punishing. Who is she?"

There was a slight tension of features, as if a screw tightened. While putting the question he fixed his dark eyes on Lord Ardenbroke.

That nobleman looked a little put out, and said, as carelessly as he could —

"That young lady is a cousin of mine, Miss Gray of Gray Forest."

"Really, how odd! The moment I looked at her, the thought struck me, that she was one of that family. It is a name that always strikes me with pain when I hear it. I sometimes think they had reason to complain, but that's an old story now, and I shan't disturb it. She's very pretty, and unless I mistake, she will take very good care of herself. I have fifty things to ask you, but not here. I know where to find you, and you'll allow me to look in on you?"

"Only too happy, and remember, you really must. I'm going now to that box over the way — I have not seen her for such a time."

"Shall I introduce you?" whispered the young man to his elderly companion, with an arch and bitter smile. The man of the long white head replied by slightly hitching his shoulder and turning a degree more away, his eyes still fixed on the remote prompter's box, while a shadow of displeasure gathered on his face, and he muttered some inaudible monologue to himself.

It was a mere whisper, and having uttered it the young man, still smiling, gave his hand again to Lord Ardenbroke, who bid him goodbye, and vanished.

"You knew vera well I did not want to be introduced, what for should I?" said the old man, with traces of a Scotch accent, grimly, and without turning. "What for should I?"

"How should I know? He might be of use to you."

The young man seemed to enjoy his friend's uneasiness.

"And the way you talk — the questions you ask at him, and the things you do, I'd say ye were daft, and I tell ye plainly, sir, I don't understand it," said the old man, turning and looking full at him for a moment.

"Understand it — of course you don't."

"No; you young men, if ye were a bit more steady and less conceited, ye'd be nothing the worse o't," said the gray man sternly.

"Cautious, cautious, but don't you know that rashness is often the highest caution?"

"I know nothing o' the kind."

"I have my own ideas about it," said the young man. "I say with Monsieur Danton — l'audace, encore l'audace, toujours Faudace!"

"And if I wanted to speak with Lord Ardenbroke," continued his elderly companion, "what for shouldn't I, without ceremony, for I ha' spoken with him sayveral times, it will be eight years since, and upon business of his own, confidential business, but I've no desire to renew the acquaintance, and if I had, ye'll understand, I should consider the present, sir, a vera inopportune time for any such purpose."

"Don't call me sir, pray call me by my name," said the young man.

"Well, well, Mr. Dacre, there, and as I am acting. with you. Mr. Dacre, I take the liberty of reminding you, sir, that business is business, and I see no room for trifling here."

"None in the world — quite the contrary, by Jove. I quite agree with you," answered Dacre.

"I came here to inform ye, with precision, on one or two points."

"And so you have — admirably."

"And I tauld ye somebody would recognise ye; ye should a sat more back, and held a bit o' playbill or something before your face."

"Or worn a paper nose and a pair of spectacles. But seriously, I had not an idea he could have known me after so long a time, for I *am* very *much* altered."

"And ye needn't have talked so long with him; he's vera well known, and I saw other folk with spyglasses turned this way, while he was here."

"Well, they didn't hurt us, and what for shouldn't I hae a crack wi' the Lord after sae mony years?" said Dacre, with a mimicry of the Scottish dialect.

"It needn't have been so long," said the gray man, accepting the phrase in good faith.

"And now, to change the subject. In a quarter of an hour this opera will be over, and then comes the ballet, and I mean to leave this in exactly five minutes," said Dacre, and he looked at his watch.

## CHAPTER IX.

### AN ADVENTURE.

IN the meantime, in Miss Laura Challys Gray 's box, another greeting had taken place, and after some talk, unnecessary to set down here, Lord Ardenbroke said —

“And so you think my friend very distinguished-looking, and — what else — I forget?”

“Yes, I think he is — and I said, fierce, sinister sometimes; and you are to answer me two questions,” she said.

“You are curious, then?”

“Yes, a little; that is — very, and you *must* tell me.”

“Well, I'll, tell you,” said Lord Ardenbroke. “He's goodnatured — he's agreeable — he's always in good spirits — he's very good company, and — I really think that is everything.”

“Does he live in London?”

“He lives all over the world, I believe.”

“Is he an artist?”

“Oh dear, no — except for his amusement.”

“And what has he come here about?”

“He has come here, he says, upon political business; that's his own account of it; but there may be some other mixed in it; in fact, I should be very much surprised if there was any public business in it whatever.”

“Well, you must answer one question. Isn't he a very revengeful person?”

Miss Challys Gray was trying to spell out some clue to the author of her anonymous letter.

Lord Ardenbroke laughed.

“That's a thing which might be very easily hidden. He was an intimate acquaintance, not an intimate friend, do you see? — very different thing. I have had no experience of him in any other way; he has had quarrels like other people — a good many; but one does not often know who is in the right, and who altogether in the wrong; and the truth is, except of his lighter qualities, I have had little or no experience of him.”

“And now you are to tell me: is he a relation of De Beaumirail's?”

“Let me consider. Isn't this a very severe cross-examination? Well, yes, this much I am sure of — he *is* related to *relations* of De Beaumirail, and” — he laughed merrily — “I should be very much flattered if any young lady were to make such particular inquiries about me.”

“Has he an antipathy to Guy de Beaumirail?”

“I know hardly anything of him, I told you, except what I've said; but I never heard of anything of the kind.”

“And what's his name?”

“You're not to ask me.”

“Not ask his name?”

“No,” said, Lord Ardenbroke, laughing, as he shook his head.

“Oh, this is quite too absurd. You promised to answer two questions.”

“I didn't, though — no, indeed.”

“Oh! yes, you did, and you must. What is his name?”

“I can only say the same thing; I can't tell it; I mustn't.”

He looked at her, laughing.

“Why not?”

There's no particular reason, except that I promised, only five minutes ago. He doesn't choose anyone to know that he's here, and he *made* me promise — I'm quite serious.”

“Well, will you do me a kindness?”

“Only name it.”

“You must go and get his leave just to tell *one* person who will not repeat it to any other creature living.”

“But won't that be putting you in a very interesting light? What is he to think?”

“I didn't think of that. But Charles, here — he can tell you.”

“But he'll be bound to secrecy, just as I am, and you, still in the dark, and — just look there — there's no use in debating it further, for they have left their box, and, perhaps, I shan't see him again during his stay in town.”

Yes, the box was empty, and Miss Laura Challys Gray was vexed. She had been so near, she fancied, obtaining a key to the puzzle that excited her curiosity and her fears, and now, perhaps, she should never know.

Lord Ardenbroke took his leave. Then followed a listless interval — nearly a quarter of an hour — before the curtain went down.

“Shall we stay for the ballet?” asked Miss Gray of her chaperon.

“Well, I'm a little tired,” said Mrs. Wardell.

“And I'm very tired,” answered Miss Gray.

“Then, I'm afraid it has disappointed you?” said Charles.

“It's very good — and the tenor quite angelic, and that basso wonderful — but somehow I haven't enjoyed it. I don't know; I haven't been in spirits.”

“You were talking to Ardenbroke about that man with the get-up, after Mario. Had he much to say about him?”

“No — next to nothing.”

He fancied that a faint tinge of crimson stole to her cheeks as she answered his question.

"Nor even about the old man?" asked Charles, who was a little surly.

"I did not think of that, it is very true; if we knew all about *him* it might throw a light — — "

How ridiculous, and even coarse, this eagerness about a total stranger! thought Charles Mannering — throw a light indeed; what stuff!

A few minutes later, having seen the ladies into their carriage, and bid good night — it the window, Charles lighted his cigar, not in a cheerful temper, and walked away towards his lodging, through streets already very nearly deserted, while Miss Gray's brougham drove at a rapid pace towards Guildford House.

The adventures of that night, however, were not yet over.

Turning the corner of a street, at a rapid pace, the of horse, young and fresh, swerved a little, the wheel struck one of those iron posts that guard the flagway, and in an instant one of the horses was lying on the pavement, and the other plunging furiously; Mrs. Wardell screaming, while the carriage rocked most uncomfortably.

The door was, however, opened almost instantly, and not by her footman, whose descent from the box was delayed by the plunging of the horses. It was the handsome unknown of the opera who opened the door. By the light of the carriage lamps she had seen this tall slender figure approaching from the front, and recognised him in his loose coat. The fine eyes and oval face, also, were not to be mistaken.

It was he who held the door open and assisted Miss Gray to alight. He led her to the pathway with as ceremonious a respect as heroes in fairy tales lead their princesses, leaving Mrs. Wardell to the care of the servant, who had, by this time, got to the ground.

"You're not hurt, I hope?"

"No — she wasn't hurt."

"You can't stay here till your carriage and horses are ready; it may be a very long wait; my carriage," he said, "is quite at your disposal; shall I tell your servant that he is to attend you home, and your friend? I wish it was more comfortable."

As the coachman reported something amiss with the harness, and a possible delay, the stranger's offer was accepted, the two ladies got in, and he shut the door; Miss Gray's servant got up beside the driver, and away they went.

## CHAPTER X.

### A FEW WORDS IN THE HALL.

AS they drove homeward Miss Gray was silent, but her thoughts were happier. There was even a little excitement that was pleasant. Did this heroic looking young man interest her independently of all theories about the nameless letter or the diamond locket, about which her conjectures grew more and more confused?

Here she was, sitting, in his carriage, a very nice one — pretty, elegant even — and utterly in the dark as to who or what he was — longing to know — with nothing but a moveable sheet of glass between her and the coachman, who could relate everything about him, and, yet, still in the dark, without a conjecture as to how she was ever to learn more than the generalities she had collected from Ardenbroke.

At last she said to Mrs. Wardell —

“Did you remark the young man who was so kind about lending us his carriage; I mean, did you recognise him as the same who sat with an ugly old man at the opera, nearly opposite to us?”

“Yes, to be sure; I could not recollect it was the very person.”

“I’ve been wondering who he is; he’s a friend of Ardenbroke’s; but Ardenbroke would not tell me who he is, and we must make it all out; you are to manage that, mind, when we get home; you can see the servant and ask him whether our horse was much hurt, or anything you please, only you must learn the name of his master.”

“Very good, my dear; suppose you tell Mrs. Rumble to get him some supper, and to make out everything while he is eating it; and I can call him into the dining-room first, so that you shall have time to give Rumble her instructions.”

This little plot was hardly completed when they reached the gate of Guildford House. It was thrown open. The carriage lamps flashed on the knotted trunks of the old elms, as they flew by, and with a sudden sweep they drew up at the steps.

The plan, so artfully contrived, however, broke down before it was so much as set in motion; for the door was again opened by the handsome young man who owned the carriage. He assisted the ladies, in turn, to alight, and Miss Gray with only a little bow, and “We are very much obliged,” ran up the steps, and disappeared, leaving Mrs. Wardell to deal with the stranger.

“Wont you come in? pray do,” said the old lady.

This handsome cavalier might have assumed this invitation to mean precisely so much as similar hospitalities so offered, do mean, and no more. Even Mrs. Wardell, curious as she had become — and what passion is more unscrupulous than curiosity? — was at her wit’s end to find a decent pretext for urging him to come into the house at such an hour, had he hesitated.

But this difficulty did not occur, for he instantly availed himself of her invitation.

He followed her into the hall, and said, “I could not deny myself the honour of coming in, just to receive from your own lips the assurance that you and your young friend were not hurt.”

“Hurt! well I do hope not injured, but shaken — shaken a good deal, and — and our nerves — you can understand — but no serious injury.”

“I’m so happy to hear you say so; and would it be very impertinent to ask leave to call to inquire tomorrow? My name is Dacre; your servant mentioned that the young lady is Miss Gray, of Gray Forest. I knew, at one time, some of her relations, and I shall do myself the honour to call.”

And thus speaking, with a bow that was graceful, as well as stately and grave, he took his leave; and in another minute was driving rapidly in the direction from which he had come.

“He’s coming tomorrow,” said Mrs. Wardell, who repaired forthwith to Laura Gray’s room, very purple, and very much out of breath, “and his name is Dacre; and I think him one of the very most agreeable and elegant young men I ever saw; and he knew some of your people long ago, and he was so kind, and anxious, and attentive.”

“Oh! coming here? How odd! And why is he coming here?” asked Laura, very gravely.

“To inquire — to ask how we are; he couldn’t well do less, he’s *so* polite!”

“Dacre — I *think* I recollect the name, but I’m not sure. Well, he’ll call; do you intend seeing him?”

“I see no reason why I shouldn’t, merely to tell him how we are,” answered Mrs. Wardell.

“No, there’s no reason,” acquiesced Laura Gray, slowly; “did he come into the house?”

“Yes; just to the hall, but merely to inquire, and ask leave to call tomorrow, which, of course, I could not refuse; but it may be merely a call at the hall door, you know.”

“Very likely. *Dacre*? Do you remember the name among friends or acquaintance of ours?”

“He only said that he once knew relations of yours. No; I can’t say I do,” answered Mrs. Wardell.

Laura Gray was sitting before her glass, in her dressing-gown, with her line hair loose about her shoulders. She leaned back in her chair.

“You’ll take a little tea, wont you? I should like some. Get tea, Noel.”

And her maid glided away.

“Dacre?” repeated Laura, thinking. “I saw him, I told you, at the opera; but distance, you know — and — I don’t know how it is, but people do look different in such places. Did he look like a singer, or an actor, when you saw him near — in the house?”

“Not at all; he looked just like anyone else, only very handsome, and distinguished,” answered the old lady.

“And what of his manners?”

“Perfect,” said Mrs. Wardell, decisively.

“He seems to have made a very agreeable impression,” said Laura, smiling, and relapsed into thought. “Dacre, I cannot recall it; yet I feel as if I ought to remember it. And what hour is he to call?”

“He did not say; and if he asks to come in I don’t see why I shouldn’t see him,” said Mrs. Wardell.

“Ardenbroke will be here tomorrow, I’m certain. What fun if he and Mr. Dacre happened to meet here after all their mystery tonight,” said Miss Gray.

So they continued to chat together till it was time to say good night, and old Mrs. Wardell went away.

Then Laura Gray, having also despatched her maid, unlocked her desk, and took out the mysterious letter and the diamond locket.

Just as that glimmering circle flashed suddenly and steadily on her eye, had the conviction gleamed on her mind that the person whom she saw that night in the box with that long-headed old man, was the author of the letter which she now scanned with an excited interest. As she read, the image of the young man, as he appeared for a moment before her, when her glass had lighted upon him unawares — was before her handsome, sinister, watching. As she read, still she saw that faint, stern smile, that seemed to imply a mutual understanding — shadowed unpleasantly before her.

And now, what did her evidence amount to? Simply to this smile and this intuition. A case of shadows. And yet this intuition continued, and the smile abated not. A painful impression — a persistent phantom — that followed her to her bed — and showed still through the filmy curtain of her eyelid.

## CHAPTER XI.

### DE BEAUMIRAIL'S AMBASSADOR.

EARLY next day, about eleven o'clock, Miss Gray was among her flowers with hoe and rake, and a pair of those rough, gauntlet shaped gloves, with which ladies protect their hands in such operations, and a small boy assisting, and to-ing and fro-ing on errands, and often on his knees grubbing in the mould.

The sun shone out pleasantly, the tufted foliage of the old trees cast soft shadows on the grass; and, yielding to indolence, and inspired by the quietude of the miniature scene, she dropped her trowel, and seated herself on her garden chair, at first watching the labours of the boy, who was working away among the weeds and flowers. But her thoughts soon carried her elsewhere. One subject had begun to engross her mind. It engaged it last at night, and first in the morning, and haunted her incessantly.

The little diamond locket she wore about her neck, bidden inside her dress, she now drew forth, and looked at the rich brown hair it contained with a pang of bitter remembrance. She brooded over that sad history with a commiseration that deepened into rage. "Thank God," she murmured, "I never faltered — it is my duty to be firm."

She replaced the locket so mysteriously acquired, and raised her eyes.

The shorn grass under the windows was cut into flowerbeds, glowing and glaring all over with masses of blossom.

The double row of elms leading down to the gate was at her left, some equally tall and spreading trees stood at intervals by the lane side, lilacs and laburnums made an underwood, and the wall had a thick mantle of ivy.

Gliding with slow, long paces from under the deep shadow, in which the noble elms at her left enveloped the short avenue, emerged from between their trunks, upon the grass, the old clergyman whom she had dismissed so summarily on the clay after her arrival at Guildford House.

It was on the whole with a compunctious feeling that she saw the old man whom she had dismissed so rudely, approaching her again. She rose, and with a few quick steps hastened to meet him, looking grave, sorrowful, with a few quick steps extended.

He bowed — he timidly extended his hand.

"I'm so much obliged to you for coming to me again. It is very good of you, sir, and I'm ashamed of my rudeness, and beg your pardon. I hope you forgive me, sir." She looked with sad and earnest eyes in his.

"Oh, dear me, I never thought it more than a momentary vexation — pray think of it no more. I took the liberty of calling to beg two or three minutes."

"Oh, sir! not, I hope, on the same subject; but whatever it may be, I shall listen with great respect, for I know very well how pure and kind your motive must be, and I am quite ashamed when I think of my ungracious and flippant words. Wont you come into the house?"

"Thank you, ma'am, very much, but a friend who dropped me at the corner will call for me in a very few minutes, and so I had better say what I came to tell you here."

"But, oh! pray do come in. Do, Mr. Parker. I can't think you have quite forgiven me, unless you do. Oh! do, Sir, please."

It was one of her fancies, and when an idea took possession of her she was irresistible. The old clergyman found himself, quite against his first intention, in the drawingroom of Guildford House, making his little speech in the cause of humanity, while the listening flowers on the window-stone trembled and nodded. But what effect did he produce where to mould the will would be to unlock the gates of despair?

"It is indeed, ma'am, as you rightly suppose, upon the same subject that I come to speak only a few words, very few, but, I trust, moving words. Yesterday evening Mr. de Beaumirail sent for me. I found him very ill; I found him in despair. In that miserable place, among the other prisoners, is a clever but unfortunate physician, who has been there for more than ten years. As I left Mr. de Beaumirail I met this gentleman, Dr. Wiley, on the stairs, and he turned and walked down with me, and said he, 'I observe that you visit Mr. de Beaumirail. I went into his room to pay my respects this morning, as I do pretty often, and found him ill.' He used some technical terms which I did not understand, but he made it clear to me that he thought him in a bad way."

"Very ill?" said the young lady, growing pale.

"I mean," answered the clergyman, "in a precarious state of health. Protracted confinement," he said, "in his present state, might in a short time prove fatal — I mean, reduce him to such a condition as would render his recovery impossible."

"Oh! Sir, isn't this cruel? isn't it *distracting*?" said Laura Gray, piteously wringing her hands. "Why do you urge me on this point? I have not told you half my reasons. I can hardly explain them to myself. You would think me mad. You argue with me as if you thought I acted from simple malice. There is what I told you mingling in it, but there is another feeling, quite different. Sit down for a moment, and let me tell you."

"Dear, dear!" murmured the old man, throwing a weary weight of disappointment into the homely ejaculation.

"Yes, I know by your looks — your tones declare it — you think me, on this point, immovable, and so I am. But listen, it is *not* malice that makes me so. It is this: a feeling, right or wrong, that he is undergoing punishment that a righteous power has awarded — a punishment that satisfies some equities that I don't fully comprehend. God knows I would set him free if I could. Is it religion — is it superstition — this awe of an unseen power that terrifies me?"

"You remember my excellent friend, Mr. Larkin, who quoted the blessed words. 'Sick and in prison and ye visited me,'" said the clergyman.

"Oh, yes, I know. I tried, sir, to persuade myself to consent to his liberation. I tell you, Mr. Parker, I *wished* it, but I can't. Those texts don't apply. The Redeemer speaks of those who are his — so entirely his, that in visiting them we visit *him*. Is it not impiety to apply that to a man who never thought of his Redeemer, of heaven, of anything — but himself, and whose prodigality and wickedness, and not his Christian heroism, have placed him where he is? Yet, even so, through mere good nature, or

weakness, or what you will, I should have set him free, but that the idea terrifies me. How can I tell how those who are gone would regard it; how God would view it; and whether I am not, if I give way, yielding not to mercy, but to an evil influence, and sacrificing the claims of affection, and the justice of God, to a base temptation? I can't define it: my poor sister! I feel it. A horror I can't describe bars my interfering with the course of that hateful tragedy. If I did so I think I should go mad. Oh! sir, don't press me. Spare me, for God's sake, and never mention it again."

The old man looked down, pained, perplexed. He did not know how to argue with a difficulty so unlike the simple vulgarities of revenge and hatred.

The old clergyman sighed deeply, and looked up as if to resume his plea. But she said, anticipating —

"No, sir. Faith may move mountains, but you cannot shake the barrier that rises before my will. I could as easily persuade you to deny your Lord, as you could me to violate that awful conviction."

He bowed, and in a minute more took his leave. She walked down the stairs with him in — silence, and from the hall door upon the grass, and, walking a few steps beside him, she said —

"I wonder whether M. de Beaumirail has an enemy called Dacre? Can you make out? — a young man called Dacre? and I will, if you think he wants money — I would tell Mr. Gryston to place a sum in your hands for his use. But more than that is impossible."

## CHAPTER XII.

### DE PROFUNDIS.

THAT same morning Lord Ardenbroke had, among his other letters, one that served to amuse him. It was from the handsome young man who had so much engaged the curiosity of the party in Miss Gray's box.

It was very short: only a few lines.

"Alfred Dacre — you are a very odd fellow, Alfred Dacre," was all his commentary; and with a smile, and a little shrug, he proceeded to read his other letters.

Later in the day he paid a visit at Guildford House, and saw the ladies there; and when he was going away, Miss Laura Gray said to him: —

"I forgot to tell you I've made out your friend's name — I mean the mysterious person in the peaked beard at the opera."

"Oh! really?"

"Yes."

"I'm not sure that you don't mean to lead me into betraying it — you young ladies are so deep," said he laughing.

"No, really; I do know it."

"Well, what is it?"

"Dacre," she said triumphantly.

"How did you make it out?"

"You shan't hear."

"Do tell me — pray do?"

"That's my secret," she replied, shaking her pretty head with a smile.

"But I have a reason, really," said Lord Ardenbroke, a little earnestness mixing in his manner.

"You shan't hear — positively no. You refused me that harmless little confidence, and now you demand to learn my secrets; not a word."

He laughed again, and there ensued a silence, and he was very grave for a minute. Then said he, looking up with a faint smile:

"Well, since you won't tell, I can't help it. But — but you must remember, you did not hear it from *me* — that's all."

"Certainly not from you," acquiesced Laura.

This little dialogue was spoken standing, and after he had taken his leave — a ceremony which he now repeated, and ran down the stairs.

By this time the good old clergyman had reached the melancholy room of De Beaumirail, within the precincts of the Fleet.

In his dressing-gown, the prisoner leaned back upon his faded red sofa, having pitched the novel with which he had been striving to kill the weary hour, on the floor, on which it lay open. Pale and weary he looked; and the hand that lay on the arm of the sofa was slowly fumbling over the brass heads of the nails, as a friar tells his beads in a vigil.

He nodded, without rising, without smiling, as the old man entered.

"I hope, my young friend," said he, "I have not taken a liberty. I have availed myself of a seat in a friend's brougham to go out to Old Brompton. I've been, unsuccessfully, again at Guildford House. I have seen Miss Gray; but with respect to the object of terminating this miserable confinement, as I say, unsuccessfully."

De Beaumirail's face lighted up with a sudden interest: he sat erect: and his finger's-tip ceased its monotonous course along the clingy nail-heads, as the old man spoke.

"Yes, Nemesis, very good," he said, with a faint sour smile. "I am sorry, Mr. Parker, you gave yourself the trouble to come all this way to tell me that — I can't call it news. Very kind of you, though," he added, recollecting himself.

"But though she won't do that," resumed the clergyman, "she is very willing — to — assist — in fact, if you required money — if you were at all distressed — —"

"Give me money," interrupted Beaumirail with a very angry laugh. "Do you mean to say she seriously offered to give me money? That is pretty near the climax, I should hope, of her insolence. I've been here three years and seven weeks. She has only to write her name, as she does to every note she sends to her heartless acquaintances — to every order she writes to her jeweller or her milliner — and without costing her a shilling — and I should be free, and the malignant little fool won't do it. Offer me money indeed. Dying here by inches! As if it were not slow and miserable enough, she'd eke out my agony a little longer, and buy the gratifying spectacle of my protracted torture by a few judicious doles. I wish I had heard her make that offer; I'd have answered — insult for insult, by heaven! But I can hardly believe it. It is not credible. Look at me here, sir; I'm not a man who can associate with the swindlers and charlatans and bankrupts, the scum of society, who are here. To me it is literal isolation — what in your convict prisons they call solitary confinement — and no brain could stand it long. If that merciless girl could keep me living until I went mad — what a complete revenge?"

"Pardon me, sir; it is not revenge — —"

"Not revenge! And what the devil is it?"

"It is a feeling — a kind of — —"

"A kind of hypocrisy, sir — throwing dust in your eyes. If it reached you as it does me — your person, your health, your brain — you'd not be the dupe of a few fine phrases. The stupid little fiend does not know the danger she is drifting into. This morning I thought the whole thing over. I don't despair yet. I shall have my chance. She likes revenge — she'll pursue it; let her. I've been passive too long. I hope and believe I may never die until I see her pride humbled and her heart broken by my skill and resolution."



"Wild words, sir," said the clergyman, sadly shaking his head.

"Wild words — wild thoughts — wild *works*! Sir, you shall see. I have thought over a possible revenge, sir, which would outdo hers. I have not put it in motion — a foolish compunction worried me to-day. I dare say I should never have tried my game if she had acted with common humanity. She has driven me to despair, and let her take the consequences."

"There, there, pray, Mr. de Beaumirail. You know I ought not to hear all that without reproof; but there are excuses. You are excited — you are suffering; reflection will come, and the storm will subside of itself."

De Beaumirail laughed impatiently and harshly. He was no longer sitting, but walking in his slippers about the room; and without arresting his march he said —

"Ho! I'm carried away by a sudden gust. I'm to subside, and sit down as heretofore. By Jove, Sir, you mistake me. Cold and hard as a block of ice, Sir. You came just in the nick of time to decide a vacillating man. Your benevolent message, Sir, has settled a very critical question for Miss Laura Challys Gray."

"Sir, may I ask you do you know a Mr. Dacre?" inquired the clergyman.

"Dacre — Alfred Dacre? I do, or rather I did," said De Beaumirail, stopping short and looking hard at the old man; "I don't know whether he is living still — do you?"

"No, sir, no; but may I ask whether he was an enemy of yours."

"Yes; about the worst enemy I ever had, and that's saying a good deal. And now tell me where you heard him mentioned."

"Miss Gray asked me to put the question I have asked to you."

"Miss Gray! Did she? Come, come, that looks oddly. Surely she said something that indicated whether he was alive or dead?"

"No; she did not say."

"Will you be so kind," said De Beaumirail, with a sudden change of manner, and an air of great interest, sitting down again in his former place, "to repeat, as nearly as you can recollect it, exactly what she did say?"

The clergyman complied — as it was very easy to do.

"And that was all?"

"Yes."

"You're sure?"

"I think so."

De Beaumirail fell into a reverie, and seemed pleased. He looked up with an odd smile.

"In that quarter," he said, "I don't think he'll do me much mischief. I suppose he is alive; wretches like him never die. Can you tell me this — did she evince any interest in that person!"

"I can't say she did — not the least. She seemed to fancy that he was an enemy of yours. She asked the question gravely, and seemed curious."

"H'm. All I say is, I think she's cleverer than I gave her credit for; I should like to know what her mind's working upon."

With these latter words he fixed his eyes rather cunningly upon the old man. If he fancied, however, that he had any secret to reveal, the simplicity and good faith that looked out of his grave, old blue eyes laid that suspicion at rest.

"Clever, cruel, vindictive; she'd pierce me with her bodkin. I carry as good a dagger — it is combat to the outrace; recollect I never sought it. It is her doing. I hate it, and it will be her misfortune, *perhaps* — I can't help it."

"I make excuses, as I said, Mr. de Beaumirail, for the angry language you employ. When next I see you, I shall find you, I trust, in a happier, at least a more resigned temper. You must excuse me also, when I say that you seem to forget, when you utter menaces like those, how powerless you are to accomplish them."

"That's hitting me where you shouldn't, Mr. Parker. It ain't fair, or generous. Quite true I'm locked up here — I don't need to be reminded — but have you never heard or read of magicians who sat in their infernal laboratories, among their elixirs, and their books, as dark and sequestered as this place, and plagued the people they hated, ever so far away, by their art? Beautiful they say she is, as other witches have been. She has drawn her circle round me here, and here I commence, at last, my incantations, and by heaven she shall feel them. It is a contest in which the time is past for relenting. I wish — I wish I knew whether Dacre is living, and in England. If he be, it is hardly a fair fight."

"There was a time, Mr. Beaumirail, when I had reason to hope that you had gathered the fruits of a good experience from your affliction — but — but your present tone and conversation disappoint me."

"I wont argue it any more than your friend Miss Gray will. I accept her version of charity, and her laws of war. I hesitate no longer, and I leave you, sir, a year to guess, and her to feel. Now from this den I shall weave my spells about her."

## CHAPTER XIII.

### TEA.

THERE was disappointment at Guildford House, for the day had closed without bringing the expected visit of Mr. Dacre. Of that gentleman Miss Gray knew nothing, and yet there was an odd feeling or mortification in her mind, by reason of this unimportant neglect. Mrs. Wardell's disappointment was now outspoken.

"If he had not proposed it, I should not have thought so much of it, although it would have been no more than a decent civility to have called and inquired for us to-day, under all the circumstances. But really, after his making such a flourish of trumpets about it, there's no excuse; and I can view it in no other light than as a most illbred omission!"

It was dark now, but Miss Laura Gray chose the shutters and the curtains open, and liked, in twilight and moonlight, the look-out upon the circumscribed but singular little landscape, and, looking listlessly from the window, she said, "A lonely pair of women, we are this evening. Even Charles Mannering has failed us."

"Yes, my dear Laura, don't you see? this way of living is so intolerably dull that — —"

"Hush, a moment. The gate has opened, and, yes, here is a carriage," said Miss Gray.

There were lights in the drawingroom, and she drew back as a brougham with a pair of horses approached at a rapid pace.

"Dear me, who can it be?" said old Mrs. Wardell, getting up and hesitating. "It can't be Ardenbroke back again, nor Charles Mannering in a carriage, and it is such a very odd hour — can it be possible — there's the knock; can it be Mr. Dacre, at such an hour?"

"It must be some one, and one visitor is nearly as odd as another," said Miss Gray.

"I — I don't know — should I go down at such an hour?" faltered Mrs. Wardell.

"Go down, certainly, you'll see him, and do precisely as you and I planned. You are to do just as you would if it were three o'clock in the afternoon — there's the hall-door open."

"Oh, dear, so it is! but the idea of bringing him up here."

"I don't say you are to take him by the collar and bring him up here, whether he will or no, but if you find him so disposed let him come up, and take some tea."

"But, my dear, it's nine o'clock."

"I don't care; curiosity must be satisfied first, decorum afterwards; don't dispute."

The door opened — the servant entered.

"Mr. Dacre's compliments, ma'am, and wishes to know particularly how you and Miss Gray are this evening."

This was addressed to Mrs. Wardell.

"Is it a messenger?" inquired Miss Laura Gray.

It was Mr. Dacre himself.

The young lady glanced at Mrs. Wardell, and found Mrs. Wardell glancing at her. Their eyes met, and Miss Laura Gray smiled in spite of herself.

"I think, dear, you had better see Mr. Dacre for a moment," said she to Mrs. Wardell.

Preternaturally grave, Mrs. Wardell arose, and told the servant to show Mr. Dacre into the library, and, after a glance in the mirror, she followed him downstairs.

Now, Miss Laura Challys Gray listened harshly, biting her under lip with a tiny edge of her pearly teeth, and smiling. "He'll come, of course he'll come — that face is full of the spirit of adventure, and I must say that old Wardell and I are behaving very indiscreetly, but it's only for once, and I really could not allow him to escape — ha, is he coming or going? No. What is old Wardell saying, I wonder?" and she laughed quietly in spite of all she could do.

"I suppose we are behaving very oddly. What, I wonder, would my sober cousin, Charles Mannering, say of us, if he happened to drop in, and — here — here — yes; here they come."

So it was, and, with a sudden reaction, her spirits sank, and she would gladly have been anywhere else. She had just time to place herself in her easy chair again, when the half-closed door opened, and good old Mrs. Wardell entered in high chat with the stranger.

There was no mistaking him. The handsome hero of the opera was before her; the oval face and small peaked beard; the delicate mouth and moustache, and the great singular eyes, which lighted upon her with a sudden and gloomy splendour that startled her.

A stately, very low bow he made her, as Mrs. Wardell said —

"This is Mr. Dacre, my dear, you remember, who was so kind as to lend us his carriage; he has been so good as to call to inquire, and I asked him to come up."

"I asked Mrs. Wardell's leave, yesterday, which she was good enough to give me. I have to make my apologies, however, for calling at so awkward an hour; but I was detained by business, from which I could not escape, in the country, and returning this way I could not deny myself, late as it is, the honour of calling to learn how you were."

"We are so much obliged; quite well. We have quite got over our little fright, and we had no idea what a service you had done us till this morning. We should have been delayed more than an hour."

Mr. Dacre seemed very much pleased. He was very handsome: it was pleasant to see him pleased. But there was, or Miss Gray fancied it something ever so slight that was bitter and cynical in the stealthy gaze with which he watched her as she spoke. But there was the smile, and there were those splendid eyes, dark and fiery. Where was this sinister light? Where were those lines and curves of cruelty which gave, in her eyes, to his beauty an anguine and dangerous character — subtle, sinuous, baleful?

His bow had been ceremonious and very grave; but there remained not the least trace of stateliness in his air, or countenance; he was chatting now very easily and gaily. He addressed Mrs. Wardell for the most part, but Laura Gray thought his conversation was intended for her. He was going now. He had set down his tea-cup. He had just told them a very odd story, which turned on an anonymous letter, the author of which, by a curious combination of evidence, he had discovered.

"Had fortune placed me in the detective service, I dare say I should have risen to be an eminent catch-thief; I should almost embrace the profession for the pleasure of tracing up that sort of villainy to its source."

The story was well told and very curious. Miss Laura Challys Gray listened to it with that kind of attention which is observant, if not suspicious, of the relator himself, as well as curious about the narrative. Her fancy, that he might be the author of the letter with the locket enclosed, had fast melted away. That Mr. Dacre was an early intimate of Ardenbroke's and that Ardenbroke should have spoken of him as he did, were reassuring circumstances. But Mr. Dacre's manners were winning, respectful, and quite charming, and now, by one of those chances that establish or overthrow a theory in a moment, he had lighted upon the very subject, and had spoken of that kind of treachery with a point and bitterness which ended all controversy.

His visit was not altogether a quarter of an hour, and in those agreeable minutes they had grown to feel so curiously intimate, as if they had known him for years.

"We are very lonely here, Mr. Dacre but if you would sometimes look in upon a very dull house it, would be goodnatured of you," said Mrs. Wardell, at parting.

"I am only too much honoured; nothing would give me so much pleasure; but I'm so unfortunate, my stay in this part of the world is so very uncertain, and I'm obliged to go twelve miles out of town every morning, to meet people on business, and there my whole day is unavoidably passed, and I never get away, in fact, earlier than I did this evening.

There was a little pause here; Miss Gray fancied it seemed to invite a repetition of the same hospitality, so did Mrs. Wardell, who stole a little glance at Laura, and seeing in her face nothing to discourage she said —

"If you happened to be passing again tomorrow evening, and would come in and take some tea, it is probable that our cousin, Mr. Mannering — do you know him? — may be here."

"You are very kind; I shall be most happy, but, may I venture to tell you the business which detains me for some little time in London is, as I explained to Lord Ardenbroke, of a nature that makes it desirable, and almost necessary, that I should not be known to be here; such are my instructions, as I may call them; and in fact it might defeat the object of my visit, which is of some importance, if I were seen, or if my name were so much as mentioned as having been seen in London, I should, therefore, as a matter of conscience and honour to others deeply interested in my mission, avoid meeting any one who might disclose the fact of my being here. I am telling you quite frankly how I am circumstanced. I also confess that I can't resist the temptation of coming, and throw myself on your mercy to spare me the risk, I may say, the serious injury of being recognised."

"Certainly, Mr. Dacre, you may depend upon it, I shan't endanger your incognito," said Mrs. Wardell.

Had her curiosity been a degree less, Miss Gray would have interposed, I think, and suggested that, considering the circumstances, it would hardly be fair to ask Mr. Dacre to run a risk, and so have withdrawn the slight invitation.

But a new theory had shaped itself in her mind, and till this new conjecture was either established or overthrown she could find no rest.

That old, ugly, harsh face, the long gray head, that had appeared beside Dacre in the box at the opera. Was its owner a kinsman of his? Could he be the writer of the anonymous letter that troubled her with an hourly increasing fever? Might not he be that connecting link, the relation of Dacre, also a relation of De Beaumirail's — and Ardenbroke had described that degree of connexion between Dacre and Beaumirail; and could she rest till that guess at least were answered?

That hard, white head, might hold no end of ugly schemes. And was there not in the letter something of the pedantry of old age lecturing youth.

She would sift this speculation to its conclusion if possible, and therefore the acquaintance of Mr. Dacre must be cultivated, and from him, ultimately, she might secure its solution.

Mr. Dacre took his leave, and his carriage drove away, and, said Miss Gray, suddenly, to her companion —

"My dear Julia Wardell, what have we — done? I assure you we are getting on at such a pace. I am quite stunned and hardly know myself."

"I don't know what you mean," said Mrs. Wardell, with perfect simplicity.

"Here, we have invited a young man — without an introduction — without, in fact, knowing anything about him, except that he is an acquaintance of Ardenbroke's, and given him a, sort of promise that he is not to find my cousin, Charles Mannering, here, when he comes to tea. I am annoyed at myself; what will Ardenbroke think of us — what must Mr. Dacre think of us?"

"I'm not the least uncomfortable about it. We have every reason to conclude that he is an unexceptionable acquaintance, and I really can't see, considering that I am here to take care of you, the slightest oddity in asking him to take a cup of tea here."

"It is odd — I *know* it's odd — so do you; and what a ridiculous termination to those plans of seclusion I had formed. How Charles Mannering and Ardenbroke will laugh! And I really think, with your experience, you ought to guard me against such absurd mistakes."

This was certainly unreasonable, considered as an attack upon Mrs. Wardell, who had simply done what Miss Gray, could she have been secretly consulted, would have insisted upon. But is it not always pleasant to lay a part of our burdens upon other shoulders, and the entire pack, even, if it be practicable?

Mrs. Wardell was huffed, and she said —

"There has been no mistake, and nothing odd; but as you fancy there is, we can easily arrange to go to tea tomorrow evening to poor old Lady Ardenbroke; you promised Ardenbroke that you would some evening, and it would be a cheer; and I'll leave our apologies with the servant to say to Mr. Dacre where we were obliged to go, and so we shall get rid of all trouble about him."

"Yes; perhaps that will do. It is a little awkward, you know," said Laura.

But Mrs. Wardell did not help her by a single word; thinking, I dare say, that she would not on any account miss Mr. Dacre's visit. "Yes," resumed Laura, "I believe that is the best thing we can do." Another silence followed, but no step was taken, I am bound to confess, to carry out this little evasion, either that evening or next morning.

## CHAPTER XIV.

### ANOTHER VISIT.

NEXT day, at about three o'clock, Charles Mannering looked in. The ladies received him, he thought, a little oddly. Had his cousin heard, he speculated, of the conversation, so urgent and dolorous, with which, yesterday evening, the good clergyman, Mr. Parker, whom he had accidentally met, had favoured him upon the inexhaustible subject of the prisoner De Beaumirail.

True, he was resolved not to open this unwelcome theme again to his cousin, uninvited. But how else was he to account for the perceptible constraint of her manner — the apparent embarrassment, indeed of both ladies, and those long silences that were so unusual in that easy society?

They were not offended with him. There was no affront, and their looks and manner implied nothing of the kind. But Laura Gray said nothing of "to-day," and invited him instead "tomorrow," to dinner, and seemed put out, and a little vexed, though not with him. And Mrs. Wardell, who was less scrupulous about her yea being strictly yea, and her nay nay, then Miss Gray murmured something about their intending to pass that evening with old Lady Ardenbroke, at which Miss Laura Gray, under her breath, uttered an impatient "oh!" tossing her head with a little glance at Julia Wardell, who returned it with a "h'm!" blushing a little, as her pretty cousin rose and walked to the window.

Altogether, Charles Mannering did not know what to make of them, and went away a great deal sooner than he had intended, more vexed and puzzled than he would have had any other living creature know.

That day moved slowly away. How was this agreeable Mr. Dacre acquiring the sombre influence which he had begun to exercise?

Partly it was due to this, that Miss Gray had resolved that, even at the risk of adding a new item to the eccentricities of their dealing with this stranger, she would, if possible, test his complicity with the author of the letter — if, in truth, he knew anything about it, and should he prove quite innocent, then she would, if need be, cease to trouble him, and drop that singular acquaintance.

Upon this oldfashioned suburb, and throng of tufted trees and old brick houses, the sun went down, and threw his dusky red over the landscape, transforming the steep roofs and chimneys in the distance into fiery domes and minarets, that faded at last in the dark gray twilight.

Tedious were the hours as those which separate the young heir from the glories of his succession, and never did day die so slowly as that one for Laura Gray.

Night came; candles or lamps were lighted in the drawingroom, and the ladies sat there, rather silently, expecting their visitor.

Miss Gray was vexing herself with doubts and scruples. Was the step she was taking dignified, or even decorous? She could not deceive herself. If it were not for the fancy that he could throw an important light upon the question of the authorship of the letter, she would not have dreamed of inviting Mr. Dacre to tea, and actually getting her kinsman, Charles Mannering, out of the way for the occasion.

"I really am growing quite ashamed again, Julia, as the time approaches, and I almost wish we had not permitted this visit. There's no use thinking now of it; but we could have got Ardenbroke to bring him here and introduce him, and the thing would then have been quite different."

"You forget, my dear, that my presence, having been a married woman, and he knows that I am *Mrs.* Wardell — he has called me so — and your kinswoman, is quite sufficient protection; there really is nothing at all odd; and, as you said yourself this morning, he might not choose to come here with Ardenbroke. If Ardenbroke saw him here, and heard us call him by his name, he would conclude that there was no longer any secret — it was you who thought of that, and of course, Mr. Dacre has thought of it also; and, I don't see any harm, and there really is no harm, and there really is no oddity, in giving that young man a cup of tea, knowing that Ardenbroke knows him so intimately."

"I will suppose you are right," said Laura, listlessly, taking a seat by the open window, through which the soft air was gently stealing.

A carriage drove by, upon that quiet road, and, after a momentary silence, Miss Gray said —

"I don't think he's coming. I dare say he's tired, and gone home; or gone to the opera, perhaps, or anywhere but here; it must be so tiresome, and, somehow, so unmeaning; and, to tell you the truth, I think we should look very like three fools sitting in a circle."

"I don't think any such thing. I think, on the contrary, he's very much taken with you, my dear; and I saw him stealing a look now and then, when he thought neither you nor I observed him. I think his visit interests him very much, and I never saw anyone more pleased to be invited."

Laura Gray, as she leaned back in her chair, smiled faintly at the carpet before her at these words; and then, raising her head, looked through the open window and the darkened air towards the gate, now invisible.

A carriage had stopped there. And now — yes — the clang of the gate was audible, and two carriage lamps came sailing up the short avenue, under the trees.

Tranquilly Miss Laura Gray leaned back in her low chair, and in a few moments more Mr. Dacre was announced, and came into the drawingroom.

Mrs. Wardell received him very cordially; and Miss Gray, she scarcely knew why, rather coldly.

He sat down and took his cup of tea, and chatted agreeably about all sorts of things. But caparicious Laura Gray was still silently insensible to those secret glances of entreaty and rebuke which good Mrs. Wardell, floundering in the deep, threw upon her.

Perhaps Mr. Dacre fancied that the ladies had been quarrelling. I don't know. But he could hardly fail to perceive the embarrassment that reigned in the drawingroom.

"One is allowed to admire China, when it is so beautiful as this, and so old," said Alfred Dacre, trying a new subject, as he turned his tea-cup round upon its saucer with the tip of his finger; "and I am sure it has a history."

"I dare say," said Mrs. Wardell, catching at the chance, "you know all about it, Laura."

"Yes, it is very old, I believe," said she; "but I am a very bad chronicler, and, I am ashamed to say, I forget all about it."

Here ensued another silence. Mrs. Wardell looked at her again with wild entreaty.

There was rather a difficulty in finding a subject. Miss Gray, notwithstanding, afforded not the slightest assistance. Mrs. Wardell, whose invention was slow, looked at her now, almost angrily, in vain; and Mr. Dacre perceiving the embarrassment, wondered when the mouse would come forth and the mountain cease to labour.

He talked a little more. But his remarks did not germinate. They were thrown on a barren surface. An inspiration reminded Mrs. Wardell, however, of a letter from her nephew, and she said, "I think I told you, Laura, didn't I? that I had a letter from poor Philip Darwin, my nephew, Mr. Dacre, and he is so miserably in love, I think he'll break his heart, poor fellow. What shall I advise him, Mr. Dacre?"

"I'm a poor authority," said Alfred Dacre, "but love is said to be the business of those who have no business — suppose you find him something to do?"

"Oh! he has plenty to do — he's in a cavalry regiment, and he's breaking his heart, for they think they are going to India."

"Oh! don't be uneasy, he'll cool there rapidly, notwithstanding the climate," said Dacre, smiling.

"Heaven grant it, poor fellow," said Mrs. Wardell.

"Heaven has nothing to do with it, I assure you," said Dacre.

"Why, that sounds very odd — you're not an Atheist?" said Mrs. Wardell, a little brusquely.

"A very complete Atheist. I hardly believe even in Cupid," he replied.

"Oh! I see you are joking, but there is an old saying, my nurse used to quote it," said Mrs. Wardell, "that marriages are made in heaven."

"Over tea-tables, and in drawingrooms, and by very odd angels, I believe. You see what a sceptic I am. Except as a spectator, however, I know nothing of marriage, and nothing, I may say, of love." He laughed. "As a rule, however, marriage seldom seems quite to restore the human race to Paradise."

"Some people are very happy in that state, Mr. Dacre," said Mrs. Wardell, in a tone and with a look straight before her, meant to convey a sense of the felicity she, at least, had conferred, when in that state.

"Good heaven!" thought Miss Gray. "What can Julia Wardell mean by harping on love and marriage in this absurd way. He will certainly think that she and I have laid a plan to marry him. It is enough to make one cry."

"Some people — yes, of course," said he, "but our education, I mean that of men, is very much against making love our first much less our only passion, or marriage our chief source of happiness. We have so many pursuits and ambitions, and amusements, and all so engrossing, I can't pretend to say which mode of making life's journey is the easier — celibacy or wedlock, each has its drawbacks like the two chaises that Miss Edgeworth mentions at the Irish inn, the top's out of one, and the bottom's out of the other," and he laughed again.

"I can quite understand young men laughing at marriage," said the persistent Julia Wardell, "but not believing in *love*, that does amaze me."

"Oh, but I do believe in it. I'd describe it as an inebriation followed by headache."

"I don't understand you," said Mrs. Wardell.

"That is, in the case of most men. *I* should be afraid of love, because, with me, it would be a first and only love, and therefore violent enough to kill." He spoke with a sadness almost enthusiastic, was silent for a moment, and then laughed. "But I have seen lovers, men who belonged to the profession, I may call it, and practised nothing else. I have watched the decline of passion and the veering of fancy. The vision fades, the charm expires, and love goes out. Now I fear the passion, because, with me, it might prove the reverse — a live-long madness. In a case like mine I could suppose something prodigious, I could suppose a man in love with his wife!"

"What do you mean, Mr. Dacre?" exclaimed Mrs. Wardell.

"Yes, that may happen," he said, "because I believe there is nothing that may not happen, although, I allow, it is not likely."

At this point of the dialogue, Miss Laura Gray got up as if she were looking for a book, or a letter, and, having slowly moved to the piano, she consummated the rudeness of the evening, in Mrs. Wardell's opinion, by playing a piece of grand and melancholy music by Beethoven.

Up got Mr. Dacre, as that terrified lady thought, to leave the room. But, of course, it was with no such intent; on the contrary, he placed himself gently by the piano and listened, it seemed, in a kind of rapture.

## CHAPTER XV.

### BEETHOVEN.

WHEN the music ceased Dacre sighed, and, said he, "That music always agitates one — it moves one's better nature, but it jars also — the spirit of anguish breathes through it — the pathetic and the victorious are soaring there, but all through is felt the vibration of a more than human pain."

Miss Laura Gray laid her hands on her lap and sighed also. A short silence followed, and she in turn spoke.

"Did you ever happen to meet a gentleman named Guy de Beaumirail?"

To this sudden and distinct question he answered as distinctly.

"How very odd! I was at that very moment, by an association hardly definable, thinking of him. Yes, I do know a good deal of him, and more than I care to know."

"Ardenbroke — you know him? — said it was not improbable," said Miss Gray.

"Oh! did he?"

He looked steadily at her, as if expecting her to say more.

"And Ardenbroke said so?" he resumed. "Well, he was quite right in one sense, although he knows very well how I feel about it."

"He is a very distant relation of ours — of mine, I believe, that is, or a connexion. I am a miserable genealogist; but I am curious to learn something about him, not the least from any interest in him, but for a different reason — something quite different."

"Yes, I saw him once," said Dacre, "very lately, and he's an undeserving fellow. I could not avoid it, but I don't talk about him — that is, as little as I can help."

"But why?" asked Miss Gray.

He smiled and shook his head a little.

"He's an awkward subject," said he.

"Are you ashamed of him?"

"Not exactly; but — but he's an awkward subject. He might have been very well, a great deal better than I am; and he chose to throw everything away, and he's in a position which I consider disgraceful, and I — *don't* — *mention* him."

He uttered this very gravely, and with a slow and deliberate emphasis.

Miss Gray was silent for a little, and then she said, "But I must ask another question — I saw you — I'm certain it was you — speaking to Ardenbroke at the opera on the night on which you were so good as to assist us on the occasion of our breakdown."

Mr. Dacre acquiesced.

"And there was an old man in the same box with gray hair, and with a long face — a severe-looking old man."

Dacre smiled a little, and nodded.

"Now, I have a reason for asking, *is* that old man an enemy of Mr. de Beaumirail's?"

"An enemy?"

"I mean — does he know Mr. de Beaumirail, and does he bear him an enmity?"

"I should say he does bear him ill-will. I know next to nothing of him, but this — that he is rich, and loves his money as people who have too much only can, and that he has lost a great deal by De Beaumirail's break-up, and I fancy hates him accordingly."

"Yes, and would like to pursue him?"

"I dare say," said Dacre.

"Do you think he would go the length of writing an anonymous letter to determine a vacillating person in a hostile course against Mr. de Beaumirail?"

"It seems odd, but I really know very little about him — nothing, I may say, not even his name, for I forget it — a formal acquaintance of an hour — very slight indeed. He had a part of a box to dispose of and I took it; that is all I know personally of him, and that he is one of De Beaumirail's creditors."

"Do you think he would be a likely person to write an anonymous letter with the purpose I have mentioned?"

"I was told he is a man of business, and I don't think it likely that he would take that trouble. Was the letter to Ardenbroke?"

"No, to another person, a creditor, who could have given De Beaumirail his liberty, by simply signing an agreement for his discharge, and declined to do so, and the anonymous writer urged a persistence in that refusal."

"Oh! that settles it. It could not have been he, for he, being creditor himself, to a large amount, could prevent his discharge until he paid him his uttermost farthing?"

"I see — yes, I suppose so," said Miss Gray, thoughtfully.

"And how did this creditor act under the pressure of his anonymous adviser?" asked Dacre.

"It was no pressure to her. She had already determined on leaving him in prison."

"*She?* — Good heavens! then it was a woman! What beasts those tradespeople are where money is concerned," exclaimed Alfred Dacre.

"Worse — not a tradeswoman, but a lady," said Miss Laura Gray.

"A lady — a lady no longer. She's self-degraded," said Dacre; "don't you think a woman so unsexed and so divested of all good, deserves to be made an example of?"

"Then you are one of those chivalrous lawgivers who would punish women, whom you term the weaker sex, as severely as men?" said Laura Gray.

"*More* severely, in certain cases," he replied. "Where they *are* wicked they are more fiendish than men. Nature has made them softer and purer, most of what is generous in life, all of what is generous in love, belongs to women, and where they commit cold and malignant cruelties they sin against nature, and become very paragons of monsters?"

"And what would you have done to this lady?" inquired Miss Gray. "Burn her alive?"

"No, on second thoughts I should leave her to the chances of reprisal and to the equities of eternity. May I ask, do you really know anything of this person?"

"I do — yes."

"Is she a Jewess, or is she a Christian?"

"A Christian!" answered Laura Gray, "by profession at least."

"Well, I *know* more of De Beaumirail than I have *seen*. He has injured me probably as much as any other man living. I don't admire Guy de Beaumirail. I divide his character, so far as it is known to me, into three parts — one part I despise, another I hate, and in the third I see rudiments of good. I have no particular wish to say one word in excuse or defence of him, but I don't envy the lady who, being a Christian, as you say, believes her Bible, and reads there the parable of the debtor whom his Lord forgave, and who afterwards took his fellow-servant by the throat, saying 'pay me that thou owest.'"

Mr. Dacre did not speak with enthusiasm. He seemed cool enough about the scamp De Beaumirail, and the menacing words uttered so coldly, acquired a strong force by reason of a latent contrast.

"There are cases in which reason will not direct us. Our coachman, I remember, one night, put out the carriage lamps — I think it was snowing, he said he could see better without them, by the very faint light in the heavens. That light for me is instinct, and my carriage lamps are reason, and in this puzzle I put it out, and rely upon the faint light from above. *I* am that wicked Christian you condemn, and I'll play that music of Beethoven's again. When I was a very little thing, my poor sister, a good many years older than I, used to play it, and I used to see tears fill her eyes, and flow down her cheeks. It inspires me."

She began to play again that strange music, without leaving Mr. Dacre time for answer, apology, or explanation.

"I never cry, I hate tears; but that air half breaks my heart," she said, "and when I grow irresolute and perplexed, I play it, and light rises up for me in darkness, and courage returns to my heart."

"I had not an idea, Miss Gray, — I owe you a thousand apologies;" pleaded Mr. Dacre, with great humility.

"Not one, no indeed. It is only that you don't understand this distracting case; you don't know the facts, you don't know my motives. And now I must tell you something, and also ask your assistance."

As she uttered this last sentence she glanced again at good Mrs. Wardell, whom she had already observed nodding in her chair. Billy Winkie, the Dustman, as in the mythology of the nursery, the angel of sleep was termed in my nonage, had visited her, and just at that moment Miss Gray did not choose to observe, or to disturb her nap.

## CHAPTER XVI.

### CONSULTATION.

"NOW, I am going to ask you two, or three questions, and you must not think them very odd, until you have heard my reasons," said Miss Laura Gray, looking thoughtfully at a little ring on her finger.

"I shall be only too happy, if I can answer them," said he.

"Has it ever happened to you to receive an anonymous letter?" she asked.

"No, never, unless you so called such things as boys used to send about on St. Valentine's day."

"No, oh no. I mean a letter assuming a grave tone, affecting to criticise conduct, to exhort, and perhaps to menace," said she.

"No, never."

"Then you can hardly understand the way in which such a letter haunts one, the feeling of conjecture, suspicion, and insecurity."

"Pardon me, I can, very well. I once knew a person almost at his wits' ends, from no other cause — an anonymous letter. I think I mentioned that I was fortunate enough to hunt down the writer of it. I assure you it cost a great deal of thought, and some resolution, but I succeeded."

Miss Laura Challys Gray, still looking at her ring, knit her pretty eyebrows slightly in momentary thought.

"I may as well tell you, this letter was written to me, and the fact is, though I did not mind it at first, I have grown perfectly miserable about it, and I can't rest till I find out who wrote it."

"In *my* researches I was very lucky. It is once in a hundred times one would have a chance of detecting such a thing; but do you really care?" said he.

"I do, indeed, more than I can describe," she answered.

"I wish so much I could be of the least use. Do you suspect any particular person?"

"No one."

"And why should you care, then?"

"I can't help it, it has made me quite nervous. It is so very strange."

"I wish I had more time at your disposal; but command me, pray, in any way you think may be useful," said he.

"Well, thanks; you are very kind. Ardenbroke, my cousin, you know him, told me that you are acquainted with Mr. de Beaumirail's relations; in fact, that some of them are connected with you, and so I thought you would perhaps be able to form a probable conjecture as to who his enemy might be, for he admits himself in the letter to be a relation."

"He may have a great many whom I have never even heard of," said Dacre; "but my best consideration and exertions are at your service."

"The letter is in the room, would you mind just looking at it?"

And she unlocked her desk and produced the mysterious letter.

"Am I to read it?" said he, as he took it in his fingers.

"Certainly," she replied. "It is an odd, letter, and contained that locket, which is a very pretty thing, a toy of some little value," she said, turning the brilliants in the light, so as to make them flash.

"That came from some person who could afford to part with a little money, and the tone of the letter is earnest. I am, however, totally without even a guess. The fact is I know very little about his relations — and what an odd seal — gallant and ghastly; do you read anything of menace in it?"

"Well, no, that did not strike me," and she smiled, but not like a person amused.

"I have now, I think, fixed the whole thing pretty well in my memory; nothing very remarkable about the paper, thick note paper, red wax, posted at Charing Cross — I shall bear everything in my mind."

"It is so kind of you, Mr. Dacre; I'm sure I am a great fool, but I can't help it; I can't get it for a moment out of my mind; even my dreams are troubled with it."

"I don't wonder," said he gravely. "I can quite understand it. I think I should be miserable myself, in such a state of conjecture and uncertainty."

"Your business, I'm afraid, will prevent your recollecting it," pleaded Miss Laura Gray.

"It is much more likely that your commission, Miss Gray, should make me forget my business; I suspect I shall think of very little else."

"It is very kind — you need not mention it before Mrs. Wardell, who has not been attending, unless you happen to discover something about it; that is, if you should call here again."

"I shall certainly call, if you allow me, tomorrow evening. I have already formed a theory; I shall test it very soon; possibly I may have something to tell. If my guess proves a right one, your intuition warned you well, for that letter indicates a danger, which, if it cost me my life, I will defeat."

Whether Mr. Alfred Dacre spoke these words with more emphasis than he had used before, or that some sense of discomfort had brought it about, at this point in their conversation, Mrs. Wardell awakened with a snort, and said, "Yes, dear, I — I — where's the dog?"

So Mr. Alfred Dacre, with apologies for having stayed too late, took his leave.

Had he ever looked so handsome before? He now filled in relation to her a double office; he was the sole depository of a secret which she felt a strange reluctance to communicate to anyone, and he had devoted himself, as solemnly as words could pledge him, to the task of quieting the anxiety which had fastened upon her.

He was beginning to have her confidence, to be her knight. He was stealing into the rôle of hero to her romance.



When she returned next day from her gardening to the house, she found a letter, the address of which startled her, for it was written in the same bold, broadnibbed penmanship which had grown so disagreeably familiar with her thoughts. She felt a little chill as turning it about she saw the same seal impressed upon the wax.

Cupid, there, as before, drew his arrow to the head; death held his javelin poised in air; the same simper, the same grin: the same invitation in the motto to "Choose which dart."

She took the letter hastily, and ran up to her room. She did not want talking old Mrs. Wardell to ask any questions.

As, even at that moment, she glanced into the glass, she was struck by the paleness of the pretty face it presented to her.

"Why can't they leave me at peace? I am attacking no one's rights; I ask for no assistance or encouragement from unknown people. Why should I be tortured by these odious letters?"

She sat down, looked over her shoulder, and getting up, secured the door, then returned and opened the letter with a sick anticipation.

"More incentives to punish Mr. de Beaumirail; more advice, I suppose; more threats."

She read —

"So, you form a plot to discover me; your path crookens. Beware of the shadow. Mr. Alfred Dacre thinks himself clever. He needs to be so. Dead men who come to life had best be modest. He challenges conflict. He will find me the more potent spirit. The world is open to him. There is beauty in France, in Italy, in Spain; let him open his breast to the dart of Cupid, and not to that other. If you will have him search me out — so be it. If he be wise, he will pass me by with eyes averted. I wait him with my spear poised. Your plot against me has drawn me nearer. Pray that you see me not. De Beaumirail defied me, and I have laid him where he is. I am willing to spare Alfred Dacre; but if need be — . His blood be on your head."

A sharp frown marked her face as she read and re-read this odd composition. She then replaced it in its envelope, looking at it askance as if on an evil talisman. She hid it away in her dressing-case, and locked it up, and then, in an agony, she said— "Why can't they let me be at peace? What can be the meaning of this cruel espionage and dictation? How could any mortal have discovered the subject of our conversation of last night? I am bewildered — frightened. God help me!"

She had murmured words like these aloud, and now looked around lest the spy, who seemed to glide through her rooms like a thief in the night, should have heard them.

"Your plot against me has drawn me nearer," she read again; "the language of the letter is so much more insolent, and angry, and enigmatical, and I, who was so brave, am growing such a coward!"

She bit her lip. She was pale, and felt on the point of bursting into tears.

## CHAPTER XVII.

### LORD ARDENBROKE'S ADVICE.

"I WISH I had never come here. I wish I were away," were the natural aspirations that rose to her lips, as she went down to the drawingroom, feeling all the time as if she were in a dream.

"You're not ill, I hope, Laura, dear," said Julia Wardell, who was at her crochet, with her dog beside her. Some minutes had passed, and now she had looked up, and saw how pale and dejected Laura looked.

"No. Oh, no! only a very little headache; nothing at all."

Julia Wardell looked at her inquisitively for a moment, from under her spectacles, but could make nothing of the inspection, and resumed her work with a few words to her dog, who evidently did not thank her for disturbing him.

A few hours later on the same day Lord Ardenbroke called.

"We like your friend so much," said Mrs. Wardell.

"A friend! Who?"

"Mr. Alfred Dacre," she added.

"Oh! Mr. Alfred Dacre? And do you mean to say he has been here to see you?"

"Yes, he has," answered Mrs. Wardell, with a little triumph. "Is there any reason why he should not?"

"Reason? No, I can't say there is; but it surprises me a little. How soon is he going? I've lost sight of him for so long. Did he say when he goes — when he leaves London?"

"No."

"I wonder where he's staying now; have you any idea?"

"No," again answered Mrs. Wardell.

"I should like to make him out — and — and have a little talk with him; but I must be in Scotland the day after tomorrow, and by the time I return he will have made his exit."

Lord Ardenbroke was silent for a time, and looked down, and Miss Laura Gray, who glanced covertly at him, saw that there was in his face a look of something more than annoyance — something of suspicion amounting almost to alarm. He stood up, and walked to the window, and looked out.

"Laura, you promised to show me over your grounds, and, from all I see, I fancy you can do so without risk of fatiguing yourself." He laughed. "Will you?"

Laura got her hat, and out they went.

After he had seen the sights, and admired and quizzed, he said, standing with her under the shade of the great old trees —

"And so you have really had a visit from this Mr. Dacre?" he said on a sudden, returning to this subject.

"Yes; is there any reason against it?"

"It is a feeling rather than a reason. I had rather he had not minded coming here."

"You gave us a very good account of him at the opera, you remember. Is there really anything to object to?"

"No; I can't say there is. I never thought — I never blamed him."

"Blamed him! For what?"

"For — anything. I say I liked him, and should have been very glad to see him at Ardenbroke, if he could have come. But there was — there is; in fact, I can't tell you; but I don't think you'd like him."

"You are determined to make him the centre figure of a mystery," said Laura Gray, and laughed.

He smiled, looked down, and became thoughtful.

"Well, you see, it is some years since saw him, till I met him that night at the opera. There were reports about him saying he was dead; but he turned up there, as you saw. And you used to like a ghost story; just suppose him a ghost, and treat him accordingly."

"What can you mean?" said Miss Gray.

Lord Ardenbroke was laughing, but he looked uncomfortable.

"Place a pentagram at the door, as Dr. Faustus did — a pentagram which Mephistopheles could not pass, you remember."

"I remember; but I should like to know what you mean," said Miss Laura Gray.

"I mean this — simply shut your door against him," he answered.

"Why?" persisted Laura.

"I can't define my reason; but he is a 'double' — a Döppelgänger — he is, I assure you. He is an unreality. I mean what I say. You'll do as you please, of course; but, upon my honour, seriously, I think, you'll be sorry if you don't act as I tell you."

She looked at him with a faint smile of incredulity; but, if he observed it, the challenge was not accepted, and he did not add a word in support of what he had already said.

"I shan't see you now for a good many days. I shall stay for some weeks, at least, in Scotland; but my mother will come and see you as soon as she is able to go out for a drive. So, goodbye, Laura, and bid Mrs. Wardell goodbye for me — goodbye. God bless you."

And he was gone, leaving Miss Gray buried in thought.

"I don't mind an oracle like Ardenbroke," she thought. "I'm not to be ordered about like a child, without knowing why I'm to do one thing and avoid another. If Ardenbroke knew what has happened, and saw those letters, and that I could communicate to him the hopes which, rightly or wrongly, I entertain of gaining some information respecting the writer of them from Mr. Dacre's cleverness and opportunities, he would probably speak quite differently; and, indeed, I need not care, for the account he

gives of Mr. Dacre is quite inconsistent with his advice to exclude him; and if he chooses to be unintelligible, I'm not to blame if nothing comes of his advice."

Then she began to wonder at the odd coincidence of Lord Ardenbroke's advice, jesting as it was, to regard Dacre as a doppelgänger and a ghost, and to exclude him from the house with that kind of horror, and the language of the letter—"dead men who come to life had best be modest." Altogether there was in the tone in which Lord Ardenbroke had spoken of him to-day, a change which chilled her.

Still she never faltered in her resolution to see Mr. Alfred Dacre, to consult him further upon the subject which now engrossed her, and to show him the more truculent letter of to-day.

And now the evening twilight made all things dim, and darkness followed, and that sense of uncertainty which precedes an event however sure to happen, which is intensely looked forward to, began to act upon this excitable young lady's nerves.

This suspense ended, however, as before. At about the same hour the carriage, with lamps burning, drove up to the door. The doubleknock resounded, and in a moment or two more Mr. Dacre was announced. Miss Laura Gray was agitated as he entered, and he, too, looked paler than usual.

Mr. Dacre chatted with an animation and gaiety which, for a time, belied the fatigue and anxiety of his looks. He took tea, and talked in a gay satiric vein of fifty things.

Once or twice Miss Laura Challys Gray detected his stolen gaze fixed upon her with an air of anxious conjecture, and as stealthily averted.

He seemed instinctively aware that Miss Gray did not choose the subject of the letter to be discussed with Mrs. Wardell. At all events, he awaited some allusion to it from the young lady before mentioning the subject, which occupied the foremost place in her mind, and, perhaps, in his.

Mrs. Wardell was one of those convenient old people who, when left to themselves, in the evening, are sure to enjoy a nap—who can sleep in perpendicular positions, and maintain, with a wonderful simulation, the attitudes of waking people, while far away on the wings of slumber.

Laura Gray sat down at the piano.

"Will you play that wonderful *poem*, shall I call it, of Beethoven's, Miss Gray? I had not heard it for ever so many years, when you played it last night."

"No, I think not. I don't care to play it tonight. There are moods in which I can, and others in which I hate it—no, *not* hate, but *fear* it."

"I know. I can understand. Nothing so capricious, or, rather, so sensitive, as those terrible nerves of music. I quite understand the feeling, having, though not so finely, I am sure, experienced the same charm and the same anguish."

"But I'll play something else. Shall it be gay—shall it be melancholy?"

"Not gay, no, not gay," said he, and sat down at the corner of the instrument. "It is so good of you to consent. One seldom hears these things played by a hand that can awaken their inner life."

"I'll play you an odd, melancholy Irish air, with an Irish name, which I can't pronounce—wild, minor, and to my ear so unspeakably plaintive," she said as her fingers rambled over the notes, making a few preliminary chords and passages.

He listened, leaning on his elbow, his fingers in his soft dark hair. She was looking through the distant window at the old trees, and thinking sadly, and, as he marked the plaintive melancholy of her beautiful features, and fancied he saw a brimming of tears in her large, blue eyes, gazing steadily at her from the shade of his hand, a smile, cold and crafty, glimmered on his face.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### A TRUE KNIGHT.

THE air was played out and over. He sighed and thanked Miss Laura Gray.

They both knew that Mrs. Wardell was lost, for the moment, in one of her little evening naps. A restraint was removed, and Miss Gray, now and then touching a note or a chord on the keys to which her eyes were lowered, approached, at last, the subject which troubled her mind.

"You were so good as to say, Mr. Dacre that you would try to make out something about that letter?"

"You may be quite sure, Miss Gray, that I have not forgotten or neglected — I have been at work about it since I saw you, but I am sorry to say with an unsatisfactory result. The person whom I suspected is certainly *not* the writer of the letter."

"Oh!" murmured Miss Gray, in a tone of great disappointment. And a short silence followed.

"I don't despair, however. If I were only sure that you really made a point of discovering, there's *nothing* I would not do to accomplish it."

"That is very kind of you, Mr. Dacre. I don't know anything I am so interested in — in fact so anxious about. I've had another to-day, will you read it?"

"Only too much obliged," said he, as he took the letter from her hand. "Yes! The same seal. 'Choose which dart.' Very obliging of him. Cupid — an odd ally of such a writer. He offers you there — I'm interpreting the emblems and inscription — amity, if not something more tender still — on the one hand, or death on the other. Cajolery and terror would be a suitable motto for such a seal, writer, and despatch: and now for the contents."

So Mr. Dacre read, and carefully re-read the letter.

"I can't tell you, Miss Gray," he said, for the first time with an expression of real sympathy and concern in his handsome face —

"With how much sympathy and compassion for you — with how much indignation against the cowardly wretch who tries to alarm you — and, I fear, has succeeded in causing you a great deal of anxiety — I say, I can't express the feelings with which I have read this dastardly thing. I wish, Miss Gray, I could, or rather dare. But this I may venture to say, that I accept this miscreant's challenge, that I will even prolong my stay in England, at all risks, and leave nothing untried to unearth and punish him."

"Oh, no, pray no — I'm so much obliged; but I merely wish him discovered, and an end put effectually to these annoyances," said Miss Gray.

He smiled — he was still holding the letter by one corner, and he shook his head slowly as he answered —

"You must allow me a discretion in dealing with the writer of this, should I be fortunate enough to discover him. Only, this you may be sure of, that your name shall not be publicly mixed in the matter, unless with your distinct permission."

"Thanks — a thousand thanks," said she; "but, Mr. Dacre, there must be no violence. If I thought there was danger of that kind it would greatly increase my anxiety; and, in fact, I should prefer going away, and leaving my persecutor in possession of the field."

He shook his head, and laughed a little again, still looking at the letter.

"I don't think going away would save you from that annoyance," he said.

"Really? Mr. Dacre, do you think he would follow us? I have not mentioned a word of this to Mrs. Wardell. I know she would be frightened. But do you really think so? or what exactly do you suppose?"

"Judging by this letter, I should say that the person who wrote it — whether man or woman — has an ulterior object, distinct from any revenge upon that miserable person De Beaumirail, who is, perhaps, as well where he is as anywhere else. I can't, of course, guess, in the least, what that object may be; but I am sure very few people would take so much trouble in following up a grudge owed to so insignificant a person as De Beaumirail now is. Of course there can be no goodwill, but there must be a more powerful motive — this is an organized affair, that last letter shows, and is *intended* to show that they have secured the services of, at least, one spy in your house."

Laura changed colour as he said this, fixing his dark eyes inquiringly upon her.

"I hope not. I can't think of any one who would be so base."

"It is a painful discovery, but the world is full of base people; and the worst of it is that the baser they are — within the limits of caution — the better they get on," said Alfred Dacre, in that sarcastic tone which he sometimes used. "Is there any person in the house who may be the writer of those letters — *think*."

"No one — no, not a creature. No servant could write a letter so correctly; it is certainly no one in the house," she answered eagerly.

"Well, then, they are written by some one, as I said, who commands the services, of, at least, one spy in your house. It may take time to detect that agent; but accident, vigilance, a momentary indiscretion, may lead to detection. If we had that end of the thread in our fingers, it would, perhaps, answer as well. I think I should reach the other. But, for the present, we must be secret — not a creature in your house must suspect that these letters affect your conduct, or even your spirits — and as Mrs. Wardell does not know anything of them — —"

Here good Mrs. Wardell snorted, covering this evidence of her condition by a little cough. Miss Gray struck gently a few chords, and the old lady resumed her nap.

"You were saying — —"

"I may say that Mrs. Wardell had better, for the present, continue in total ignorance of their existence."

"Perhaps so."

"*Certainly*; because Mrs. Wardell would talk to her maid, and she in the housekeeper's room; and the person who acts as spy would report that the letters had produced an agitation, and *that* would induce caution on the part of the machinators, and increase the difficulty of our pursuit."

Miss Gray thoughtfully assented.

"And now I'll tell you why I think things apparently so slight as these letters deserve your prompt and serious attention. I am quite clear that your intuition has not deceived you. There is an object in these practices deeper than any hatred of De Beaumirail. They want to frighten you into some concession not yet so much as hinted at. The fact that a trinket of value has been sent with the letters, convinces me that something serious is intended. For it was no gentleman who wrote that villanous letter. That locket can't be worth much less than a hundred guineas. It is sunk, you may be quite certain, upon a commercial calculation of ultimate profits. Your leaving the country would not extricate you from their machinations. The same annoyances will probably follow you, go where you may. It is a terrorism, with an object, and there is but one way of relieving you from it, and, that is, by tracking the beast to his lair; and, with God's help, I'll reach him."

"But, Mr. Dacre, there is no need to run into danger," began Miss Gray.

"Danger disappears before a resolute will. There shall be no danger — nothing but victory. Let me tell you why I speak in so sanguine and confident a spirit: if, as I suspect, this odious persecution originates from some one point in the circle of debt and villainy that surrounds that miserable fellow, De Beaumirail, I have opportunities which no other person possesses, of placing my hand upon its spring. I will see De Beaumirail again tomorrow. I don't much enjoy an interview with him." He laughed. "I have had one already, and thought it quite enough; but I must see him, and from him I will learn who are his enemies among the people at present in London. I shall have all the light that he can indirectly throw upon it; and there is a great deal that I cannot yet tell you. But I hope I may soon have something very decisive and very satisfactory to say."

"I wish, Mr. Dacre, I could tell you how much obliged — —"

"No — no — you are not to use that phrase to me."

"But I can't help saying how very kind I think it; and I think it is very selfish, allowing a friend to engage in so irksome and, perhaps, dangerous an enterprise."

"You don't know all I feel about it. You have called me your friend, pray do not recall that distinction — it is my dearest hope to deserve it. You shall soon see how terribly in earnest I can be, and with how enthusiastic a devotion I consecrate myself to such a cause as yours. I abandon every other occupation and pursuit, and, till I have succeeded, shall think of nothing else. And — no — you are *not* to thank me. Perhaps when I have succeeded I may hear, without a sense of utter unworthiness, that delightful assurance."

Mrs. Wardell had been conversing with her dog while Mr. Dacre finished his sentence; and under cover of this tender babble and its snarling accompaniment he added —

"Have I permission to call again tomorrow evening? I may have nothing to tell you; but possibly I may hear news that will interest you."

"Pray do; but — but you will be engaged about business of your own — that business that so much occupies your time."

"I have told you, Miss Gray, I forswear it in favour of yours; not one moment of my time shall it engage tomorrow."

"Then you *can* come to us earlier, can't you?"

Mr. Dacre's countenance darkened, and then he smiled, oddly: —

"I thought I mentioned to you, Miss Gray — or — no. I beg pardon, it was to Ardenbroke, that it was not my business only, but a condition imposed upon me altogether in the interest of other people, not to let myself be known to be in London — at least for some little time. I am, therefore, obliged to observe a sort of mystery, or to make my excursions — as that UNKNOWN CORRESPONDENT says — like a man who has returned from the dead — is not that his phrase? — in the dark."

"In the dark?"

"Yes — certainly in the dark."

His even white teeth glimmered as he laughed gently and coldly, and she fancied he looked paler.

Did he anticipate more danger than he chose to avow?

"Those who invoke the dead must abide the consequences. I look upon their mention of me, and in those menacing terms, as of good augury. If they understood me better they would not have resorted to threats. As it is, their doing so betrays their apprehensions — they are conscious of my opportunities."

Mr. Dacre was looking sternly on the ground beside his boot as he spoke, and he fell into a grim reverie of a few seconds.

"Suppose," he said suddenly, raising his eyes with a look inquisitive, and it seemed also cruel — "A thought has struck me. Suppose the motive of this experiment upon your nerves should prove to be hatred of you rather than of De Beaumirail?"

"Hatred of *me*?"

"Yes, Miss Gray; because you are yourself incapable of hatred, malice, and revenge, you fancy such things do not exist, or if you do, you do not, and cannot, understand their infernal psychology."

Miss Gray dropped her eyes.

"Nothing so hard for the young and gentle who have seen nothing of the world — nothing of human nature — except within the paradise of home, as to believe in the existence of those reptile natures, cold-blooded, full of poison, patient, and more subtle than any beast of the field."

"The confines of revenge and justice are so hard to define," said Miss Gray in a very low tone, still looking down.

"Oh! oh!" he laughed very softly in a kind of derision, "much they think of justice. No; the strange thing is this — such people will hate you *without* a cause — will hate you for your prosperity — for your position; or, if in your walk through life, ever so accidentally, you, tread on a fibre or touch their skins, they'll sting you to death if they can."

Miss Gray sighed.

"You, Miss Gray, are young; you have as yet neither had adulation nor misery to harden your heart. You are forgiving and compassionate, and can conceive no other nature. Because you are conscious of never having intentionally inflicted one moment's pain on any living creature — are incapable of revenge — —"

"No, *not* incapable of revenge; but my revenges are peculiar, and not from a malignant motive," said she, interrupting suddenly.

"Revenge, and Miss Laura Challys Gray! Oh! no. That were a discord of which nature is incapable. Revenge! Perhaps you avenged a scratch by striking your kitten with a glove, or committing some other such cruelty!"

"No," she again interrupted; "I have been what many good and stupid people would call revengeful, but not from malice. I have requited injury by punishment, and I mean to persevere in so doing."

Mr. Dacre smiled and shook his head.

"I suspect, Miss Gray, you are taking a tragic view of yourself. There are some things too hard for my belief, and one is, the possibility of your cherishing a harsh thought or feeling."

"But I can't bear to be thought better than I am," said Miss Gray; "and it may be that it will help you to conclusions."

"Yes," he said, with a faint laugh, "so it might, if you think you really have enemies."

"I don't know. You saw Mr. de Beaumirail?"

"I saw him, yes, for ten minutes only; it was a very dry and hurried interview. My wish was to make it as short as possible, and I had to crowd a great deal into it."

"Did he mention me or my family?"

"No, not a word."

He paused inquiringly.

"Well, then," she said, "there's no need that I should mention him more."

There was a little silence here.

"From what you have told me this evening, Miss Gray, I may conjecture a great deal, and for the present I must return to my proper element — darkness."

"Oh?" she said, with that look of imperfect apprehension and inquiry, which seemed to ask for explanation.

But Mrs. Wardell now broke in with —

"Charming music! Do you sing, Mr. Dacre?"

"I can't say I do. I once did, a little; but among musicians I could not venture; and, at all events, my happy minutes have run out, and I must say good night."

## CHAPTER XIX.

### WHO ARE THE DACRES?

NOW he was gone, and with the moment of departure came that revulsion which always followed her interviews with him.

How was it that he had stolen into those strangely confidential terms with her? So soon as he went she felt like a somnambulist awakened, who opens her eyes in the confusion of an interrupted dream, and in an unintelligible situation. Something for a moment like the panic of such an awaking, agitated Miss Gray.

Next day, at about five o'clock, came the old Countess of Ardenbroke. The invalid either could not or would not get out of her carriage, so Laura Gray came down and got into it, and was very affably received by the thin old lady in an ermine tippet, propped with cushions, and with her feet upon a heated stool. It was hard to say which was paying this visit. She made Laura sit opposite to her, and told her all about her health and her sufferings, and her wants and sorrows with her maid, and various little bits of news about fifty people of whom Laura had never heard before. And now the visit being over, before Laura bid her goodbye, she said —

"You know something, Lady Ardenbroke, of the De Beaumirails, who were related to us?"

"Yes; not a great deal, but something."

"Can you tell me anything about relations or connexions of theirs named Dacre?"

"Yes, there were Dacres."

"Are they related to *us*?"

"No. De Beaumirail's uncle married a Dacre, that's all. Why?"

"Nothing, only that; I know that a Mr. Dacre has turned up in London who claims to be a relative of the De Beaumirails."

"Don't believe it, my dear. The last of those Dacres was Alfred Dacre, who died, let me see fully ten years ago."

"Alfred! Are you sure?"

"Yes. Alfred."

"Oh, then, it must be a brother of his."

"No, it can't be that. There was no, brother. The property has gone to the Davenants," said the old lady.

"Alfred Dacre, a friend of Ardenbroke's," repeated Miss Gray; "then you have seen him, I dare say?"

"Oh, dear, yes, a hundred times."

"Then it must be a mistake. Was he agreeable?"

"Yes; agreeable, amusing, and odd. I think he was clever."

"And young?"

"Yes, young — quite a young man."

"And good-looking?"

"Oh, very good-looking. The Dacres were all that. I'll tell you what will give you an idea. If you suppose Mario, the Tenore at the Opera, in some of his most becoming parts, you have a very good idea of him."

"Oh!" said Laura Gray in a very low tone, dropping her eyes for a moment. She had seen the great Tenore, and the general likeness had struck her on seeing her mysterious visitor.

"Yes, it must be a mistake," she repeated.

"I think so," said the old lady. "There is not one of that family left, and it is ten years since that handsome creature died. There may be cousins. I don't say positively; but if there are I never heard. And why do you ask me all these questions?"

"I haven't asked many, have I? But it was only that when we heard him mentioned, Julia Wardell remembered the name, and was puzzling over it."

"Well, if there is one of that handsome family left, pray don't think of making him master of Gray Forest. Dear me, how the little creature blushes!"

She had blushed very brilliantly.

"I — I didn't know; but if I have," said Laura, "it is because I blush more capriciously than any other person I ever heard of, and totally without a cause."

And hereupon she blushed still more intensely.

"Well, dear, don't mind; it's very becoming."

And she kissed her. And Miss Gray said, with a laugh —

"It is very provoking; but I assure you my blushes bear false witness, and there is not the slightest excuse for them. And now your horses are impatient, and I have delayed you a great deal too long."

So in turn she kissed the old lady, who forthwith departed for her drive in the park.

"It must be a cousin, then," thought the young lady as old Lady Ardenbroke's carriage drove away, "and when we come to know him a little better, of course he will tell us everything."

That evening the two ladies sat as usual in the drawingroom of Guildford Hall, and the hour of tea was approaching when Charles Mannering joined the little party.

Laura Challys Gray was very frank and true; but was she quite so glad to see him as she seemed? Perhaps she was; but if so, she quickly recollected something that qualified that sentiment.

Mr. Dacre would probably look in as usual, and would he quite like an introduction to a stranger under his present circumstances?

I don't know whether he imagined some little constraint or coldness in his reception, for he said —

"I'm afraid it's very cool my coming this way. I should have waited, I dare say, until I was sent for?"

Though he laughed; Miss Gray thought he was piqued.

"If you stay away, Charlie, until I send for you, it will be a long wait. Not," she added kindly, "that I should not wish to see you back, but being just as proud as you are — if you choose to stand aloof and grow ceremonious — I shall draw back a step too, and then, little by little, we shall stand so far that the tips of our fingers can't touch, and shaking hands any more will be quite out of the question. Therefore, Charlie Mannering, you must never be high or cold with me; but if you are angry scold me, and if you think I have affronted you, say so, and we may quarrel for ten minutes very spiritedly, but at the end of that time we'll be sure to shake hands, and then we'll be better friends than ever."

He smiled on her, very much pleased. He looked on her as if he would have given her the Kohinoor at that moment, had he possessed it. But he only said, after a little silence —

"I don't know, Challys, that you are not preaching a very good philosophy — what shall we call it? the sect of the plain-speakers — of which it would hereafter be written: This school of philosophers was founded by Laura Challys Gray, the first of the wise women of Brompton, who practised her philosophy with such a charm and success, that she speedily drew about her a school of disciples of the other sex. But it needed so much beauty as well as so much natural goodness to make the things they said go down with the unlearned, that her followers were ultimately beaten and dispersed; and the doctrine and practice of the plain-speakers being discovered, in a short time, to amount simply to speaking the truth, fell speedily into contempt, and in deference to the devil, whom it was intended to shame, and who is always paramount in London and the suburbs, it was peremptorily put down by the respectable inhabitants, and so fell into absolute neglect."

"Many thanks for that page of history, which will also recount," said Miss Gray, "that, in the same remarkable age, one Charles Mannering, of the same city, set up as a prophet, in which profession he had some moderate success, up to the period of fulfilment, when nothing ever came of his prophecies; and when he and the wise woman of Brompton met of an evening, they had so much to say to one another, and were so very wise, that they invariably forgot that it was time to take their tea, the more especially as in that dull age their audience usually fell asleep, and there was no one consequently to remind them. So as Julia Wardell is taking her nap, would you mind touching the bell? for I think a little tea would do us all good."

They had tea, and talked on pleasantly, and Mrs. Wardell, waking, said —

"By-the-bye, Charles Mannering, you know Mr. Dacre, don't you?"

"Haven't that pleasure. Who is he?"

"Oh, dear! a most agreeable and handsome young man, whose acquaintance we have made. He'll probably be here to tea. Did not Laura mention him?"

"No, I think not."

"Did you?" said Mrs. Wardell.

"No," said Charles, "but I'm really glad to hear you have made an agreeable acquaintance. I told you you would find your solitude here insupportable, didn't I?"

He spoke with a smile; but I don't think that he was a bit pleased, nevertheless, to find that solitude invaded. I suspect he would have liked very much to ask some questions about this charming Mr. Dacre, of whom he had already an uncomfortable perception, as an insupportable puppy whom these ladies were, no doubt, bent upon making him still more conceited. But what need he care, or how could it possibly interest him? So, with the hand next it, he gently touched a few notes of the piano, and hummed an air.

While he was thus engaged, the door opened, and Mr. Dacre was announced.



## CHAPTER XX.

### THEY DRINK TEA.

MR. DACRE, entered, and, as he did so, his quick eye detected the presence of the stranger, leaning upon the piano. Miss Gray observed the shrewd, hard glance which he directed on him — it was hardly momentary, it seemed but to touch its object, but it was stern and suspicious.

"I ventured, you see, to look in on my way into town," said he, advancing quite like himself in a moment.

"We are charmed to see you," said Mrs. Wardell.

"Rather cool at this hour, and not quite, usual," thought Charles Mannering sarcastically, as he looked at Miss Gray, whose hand the stranger's was just now touching. "By Jove! a fellow, learns as he gets on — nothing like impudence, I do believe, plenty of conceit, and a little impertinence. I dare say I'm rather in the way here."

Charles Mannering's sneer, however, was not inconsistent, it seemed, with his staying where he was. He had no notion of going — he went on fiddling at the piano, and a stranger might have fancied that his whole soul was absorbed in the attempt to stumble through the treble of an air.

Mr. Dacre put down his cup of tea on the table, and seating himself beside Miss Gray, he said, with a glance toward the pianist, which seemed to say, "There's no risk, I see, of being overheard."

"I have made a discovery since I saw you."

He paused with an odd smile, looking in her eyes. She was silent.

"Can't you guess what it is?"

"About those letters," she said, very low.

"Of course — yes — about those letters; can't you guess?"

She looked at him, and down for a moment, but she could not, nor at all fancy why he looked at her with a kind of significance.

"No, I can't — not the least," she said, at last, with a little shake of her head. She fancied he looked a little disappointed.

"Ah! then you really have formed no conjecture?"

"No — none. Do pray tell me if there is anything worse than I fancied," she said.

"No. In one sense not at all — that is, my suspicions point at no one in whom you place confidence, or with whom you need have any relations, but recollect they are as yet suspicions only, and I thought that you, perhaps, might throw some light to confirm or dispel them."

She shook her head.

"Well, I shan't say a word more, until I can speak with a little more confidence. If my conjecture is right, a plan both curious and atrocious has been formed. I give myself three days to find it out. I shall withdraw myself, for that time, from every other occupation. The villain De Beaumirail is, I believe, implicated in it, and its centre is another person of whom you know nothing."

"Mr. de Beaumirail! How can that possibly be? The letters come evidently from an enemy of his."

"Say a *pretended* enemy — a real enemy of *yours*. I do not say the letters are written by him; they are written by a still worse and more dangerous man, and they are, as I thought, but the prelude to other steps. You had an idea, do you remember, that you were watched — *I* certainly am, and with no friendly purpose. Don't, pray, Miss Gray, don't suppose that I regret any little trouble that may fall to my share in this affair. You little know my feelings; you little understand, if there were a real danger to be encountered, with what devotion, and happiness, and pride, I would meet it." This was spoken low and rapidly, while his great dark eyes were fixed on her with the enthusiasm and admiration, which for a moment held her in their wild fascination, and before she could chill it by look or word that gaze was lowered, and turning quickly, he said to Mrs. Wardell, who bored him so wonderfully little, by either talking or listening during these strange little visits. "Have you heard, Mrs. Wardell, of the wonderful man who is coming to London — a Malayan magician, who has turned the heads of all Paris, and sees futurity — and describes it — in a crystal circle which he holds in the hollow of his hand?"

"Futurity! Tell us our fortunes, I suppose! Why that will be extremely amusing, and even curious, I dare say."

"Quite amazing, if all they say, or even half they swear, is to be believed. Everything turns out exactly as he says, and he can tell everyone everything that ever happened to them in their lives."

"A rather inconvenient faculty," said Charles Mannering, who had seen the little confidential *tête-à-tête* which had just occurred, and had observed, he fancied, a tinge in Laura Gray's cheek which was not there before, and had felt the sting of a new mortification. "Of course, with people who have no fault to find with themselves it is different, but I should not like to find a Malayan savage in possession of all my poor secrets, and ready to hand them over for half-a-crown to my civilized neighbours."

This was to Mrs. Wardell.

"Well, of course, there are things one would tell to friends, you know," began Mrs. Wardell.

"I don't know," answered Dacre, "that friends are not the very last people one ought to tell anything to; they are so reserved and odd in this age of iron, or brass, or whatever it is; and my belief is that people who don't trust, are not to be trusted."

Laura Gray laughed, and said —

"You are very hard upon friends tonight; I hope, Mr. Dacre, *you* don't think all that."

Mr. Dacre smiled, without glancing even momentarily at Charles Mannering, or seeming at all conscious of his presence. Perhaps he viewed that young gentleman's presence here as much in the light of an impertinence, as Charles had his.

"I don't exactly know what the question is."

"I mean," she said, "that people are worse friends — more reserved, and less trustworthy, than they used to be; in fact, that friendship is degenerating."

"I believe that the cant of perpetual degeneracy, which has been fashionable in all ages, is simply the register of the discontent that characterizes our unreasonable human nature in every age alike. Every man who is treated according to his deserts fancies himself illused because he is not treated according to his egotism. When I hear general invectives I know that the declaimer is wincing under some secret ulceration of vanity! Friendship degenerating! Human nature losing its characteristics! The Ethiopian changing his skin, and the leopard his spots! How could you think me such a muff?"

"But that is very much — is not it? — what Mr. Mannering said," interposed plain-spoken Mrs. Wardell. "What was it — what *did* you say?" she asked that young gentleman.

"I talked, I believe, some such folly as young men usually do when they attempt to, philosophize. I no more think of remembering it when I do it, than I dream of listening when others commit the same folly."

Mr. Dacre looked at Miss Gray and laughed gently. It was ineffably provoking, it seemed to say, "How amusingly the fellow winces. Were they making a butt of him?"

It did not mend the matter that he was nearly certain that this Mr. Dacre, who had grown in a day or two into an intimacy, was the same handsome young man whom he had seen in his box at the opera.

"I know I'm not so pretty as that doll of a fellow, but I'm worth fifty of him," was Charles Mannering's modest thought; "I'm a man; he's a puppy. He talks like a coxcomb."

He's a selfish, conceited, pushing fool, and I could throw him out of that window as easily as the sofa-pillow."

Charles was very much vexed, but he had no notion of carrying on this covert sparring with him, a game in which he might possibly suffer; in which, at all events, it was not easy to keep one's temper.

"Suppose we have a little more light?" suggested Mrs. Wardell. The room was very imperfectly lighted; it was a fancy of Laura's when there was moonlight.

"Isn't it almost a pity?" said Laura, approaching the window, and looking out. "It seems so inhospitable — shutting out the moon, so gentle and beautiful and benignant. I think I'll put it to the vote; what do you say, Charles?"

"Very much honoured; but I can't agree with you. I have no sympathy with your hospitality, in this case, and I think the world's large enough for the moon; it has room enough to shine in without troubling your drawingroom; and I'm not so sure of its benignity, and I have no sympathy with the man in it; and altogether I'm for shutting the whole affair out, and having the drawingroom to ourselves, and the blessing of candlelight."

Miss Gray nodded, a little vexed, perhaps; very childish, but so it was; and Charles's speech was not the pleasanter for this.

"And what do you say, Mr. Dacre?" she inquired.

"I? Of course I vote for the moon and against the candles. I quite agree in the spirit of your remarks; and now, Miss Gray, we stand divided, two and two, and, as the lawyers say, there is no rule, and things remain as they are."

"Really! Well, that's very nice, and I think that lamp is quite light enough to read and work by; and, Julia dear, I'll only ask a few minutes longer; the light is really so beautiful."

And she leaned on the side of the window looking out. Under the dark elm trees, near the gate, she saw the carriage faintly; over their tops, above a filmy cloud, the moon shone resplendent.

Charles Mannering saw her, and would have liked to go to her side, and look out also. But he was vexed and high with her, and would not go till he was very clearly wanted.

But Alfred Dacre was, in a moment, at her side.

"I must go in two or three minutes," said he. "I have a call to make tonight; you think, perhaps, I am making too much of this affair; you will think otherwise by-and-bye; but you have nothing to fear, being, as you are, forewarned." He spoke dejectedly, although his words were cheering. "Remember, though evil spirits compass us about, they cannot hurt us but by our own fault. I say this to prevent your allowing yourself to be agitated if a new scene in this conspiracy should suddenly unfold itself. I do believe this place is watched. I know that I am suspected, and I regret this only because it makes my success the more uncertain. I have said all this to assure you that no matter what unlooked-for occurrence may take place, you have no personal danger to apprehend."

"I don't understand you. I grow only more and more bewildered," said Miss Gray.

"I don't wish you to understand more than that. Simply that you are not to let your fears overpower you. The real struggle will be at a distance. Actual danger shall not touch you, and now — (I was going to say goodnight, but, oh! not yet!) I shan't see you, Miss Gray, for three days, and then something decisive. Three days seem a long time now — what an egotist I am, and you hate egotism. Absorbed by my one dominant feeling, I would subordinate all people and considerations to my special revenge — and you hate vengeance — upon the troublers of this tranquil little place. Pray mention it no more tonight; my minutes here are counted. Is it possible to describe that moonlight? How it spiritualizes all vulgar things. I am sure that is the secret of its charm for lovers and for poets; it so resembles — I mean in that respect — both love and poetry. How love, for instance, exalts and beautifies the homeliest objects in the surroundings of the beloved. Do you remember, Miss Gray, you mentioned a moonlight sketch of the ruins of Gray Forest, and promised to let me see it when next I came?"

"So I did," she said, a little flattered by his recollection. "But it really is not worth looking at."

"I've heard of your drawing, Miss Gray. Ardenbroke, who is a very good judge, admires it so immensely, and I've been told it is not the least like the drawing of an amateur — so much poetry, so much force."

"If you really thought all that, I should be very foolish to lose your good opinion by showing what my poor drawings really are."

"Is the one I speak of in the room?"

"No."

"Could you send and get it?"

"Well, no; but I never make a fuss about anything I've made up my mind to; and you shall see the sketch, as you make a point of it, although it is perfectly true that I am ashamed of it."

"Pray not now, though," said he; "I had no idea you could think of going yourself." But it would not do; she was gone.

## CHAPTER XXI.

### A STRANGE FACE.

OLDFASHIONED lamps, swinging from chains lighted the lobby, and the stairs, and the hall. She knew the spot in the library where she could lay her hand upon the drawing. For a moment she had forgotten the anxious subject of her thoughts. But the transition from the glow of the lighted hall, to the spacious and dark room, with its narrow scenery standing in moonlight and shadows, white and black, before the window, with a sudden chill recalled the hated ambiguities of the conspiracy, which day and night fevered her curiosity, and alarmed her imagination.

With an instinctive wish to escape from the room and accomplish her errand as quickly as might be, she hastened to the table near the window, and as if her approach had evoked it, suddenly the figure of a small, rather long-limbed man, appeared at the same large window, and laying his arm above his eyes, to shade them from the reflected light, he looked for some seconds into the room.

The light coming from behind touched his face oddly. The outlines of the figure were apish, and there was, as well as she could see, something sinister, which stared into the room with great eyeballs and a gaping mouth.

She stood quite motionless, and chill, as if she saw a ghost. She could not tell whether this man, with his face close to the glass, and his features distorted by the faint odd light and deep shadow, saw her or not. One thing she felt — that he might be one of those persecuting agents who were spying out all her ways, and weaving about her a net, with what object or how much malignity she could not guess. For a moment she fancied that this person, who seemed, by an intuition, aware that she was coming, had placed himself there with the intention of injuring her.

As quickly almost as he came, however, he disappeared. Very pale, Laura Gray found herself on the stairs, close to the drawingroom door. Charles Mannering she heard singing to his own accompaniment for the entertainment of Mrs. Wardell, who seldom failed to ask him. The sounds reassured the girl, though she still felt frightened, and she was about to venture into the room under cover of the music, when, looking stealthily over the banister, she saw the hall-door partly open, and the little sinister figure she had seen at the window, step in, peering jealously round him as he did.

The idea that he was in search of her took possession of Miss Gray. With renewed terror she got into the drawingroom.

Charles was singing, and Mrs. Wardell whispering to her lapdog, as she tenderly folded him in her arms, the question, "Is not that charming, you little angel? but we mustn't bark — no, no,"

Charles Mannering's performance was nothing to boast of, and he knew it. He chose to oblige the old lady tonight, however; partly, I think, to show that he was perfectly at his ease, and happy; and being engrossed with his own music, as singers are, Miss Gray passed across the room lightly, without exciting observation, except that of Mr. Dacre. Her face was so pale, that he exclaimed in a whisper, and with a gaze of alarm,

"Has anything happened?"

In a whisper she replied,

"A very wicked-looking, little man, with a pale face — I could hardly see it, stared in through the library window at me, and, as I reached the top of the stairs, he came in at the hall-door. I think he must be one of those dreadful people; for God's sake, Mr. Dacre, will you run down and try and get the servants to help?"

Mr. Dacre got quietly out of the room, and ran down the stairs. There was no sign of anyone in the hall, or in the rooms opening from it. The servants had seen no one.

"A mistake, no doubt!" said Mr. Dacre, and ran up the stairs again, and, as he did so, he thought,

"De Beaumirail and a Jew, a not unnatural association!" and he laughed gently, and shrugged, as he said it.

Softly, lightly, he entered the room.

"But that you are so confident," he whispered, "I should fancy it must be a dream — not a creature except the servants downstairs, and everything perfectly quiet. They have gone to search the upper part of the house, but I think you may be quite at ease about it."

"No dream — quite a certainty," she said.

"Oh! no — not that; I mean only that the fellow just peeped in at the window, and afterwards at the door. I wish to heaven I had seen him, so that I should have known him afterwards, if I met him. I quite agree with you as to the object of his visit."

As they talked a postman's knock sounded through the hall, and Miss Gray was instantly silent; she expected one of those odious letters.

Fortunately, for the safety of the secret, which she still hated to divulge, Mrs. Wardell had asked Charles Mannering for another song — a quiet little pastoral ditty, which she loved, and which he sang with very angry feelings, for he did not lose the little scene — the lowtoned confidences — in short, the insufferable rudeness of Miss Laura Gray and that conceited young man, who did not know how to behave himself, and talked incessantly all the time he was singing.

No letter came up — no parcel — nothing; five minutes more passed, and Mr. Alfred Dacre lingeringly took his leave; and he whispered, as he was about to go, "May I write a line if anything should happen?"

"Well, I suppose so; that is, if anything of any consequence should happen — thanks."

So he bid her goodbye. He took Mrs. Wardell's hand, and bid her also a farewell — and took no notice of Charles Mannering, who took none of him; and then this little drum broke up, leaving Charles very sulky and bitter, and Laura distraught and excited.

I can't wonder at Charles Mannering's mistake, all things considered; and, perhaps, his odd state of temper is also intelligible.

"I see, I was very much in the way this evening," said Charles, not able to contain longer.

"You! in the way; not in the least; no one is ever in my way; if they are disposed to be so, I dismiss them."

"Then, they must be greater fools than I if they ever come back."

"But you were not *de trop*, and I did not send you away; on the contrary, you made yourself very much the reverse. I wanted to say a few words to Mr. Dacre, and I thought you very considerate, if you meant it."

"I really did not happen to be thinking about it at the time; and what you have just said quite satisfies me, and I need not reproach myself any more."

He was thinking of going; but he wanted resolution. He took up a book, and turned over its leaves, and tried to think of something careless to say to Mrs. Wardell, but could not; and, at all events, that lady was at that moment in one of her gentle naps. He looked toward the window where Laura Gray was sitting, but she was not looking toward him, on the contrary, through the window, "following, no doubt," thought Charles, "in spirit, the departed Don Whiskerandos, who has passed beneath those files of elms."

This sensitive Charles Mannering — sensitive at least in all that concerned her — saw that there was no suspicion of affectation or pique, but that her inattention was perfectly genuine.

"Polite, certainly," said he, with a bitter smile, glancing from nodding Mrs. Wardell to Laura Gray, who was looking out of the window.

He was thinking of going unperceived out of the room, and adding some life to the landscape which Miss Gray was contemplating, by walking away before her eyes. But again his heart failed him, and he sat down on the corner of a chair beside the unfailing piano, and began again to touch its notes.

## CHAPTER XXII.

### CHARLES OBJECTS TO THE NEW WORSHIP.

AT length he could stand it no longer, and, said he, sitting erect and addressing the window in a clear tone, and with a rather bitter jocularity —

“Nothing ever arrests the progress of mind and the march of discovery.”

Laura looked at him with her large eyes, a little puzzled, and after a little pause, she said —

“Your allusions, I am sure, are wise, if one could only understand them.”

“I did not intend to be the least mysterious, I assure you. I’ve been away just forty-eight hours. It is very amusing — and I find a new worship established.”

“A new worship! I don’t know what you mean. What worship, pray, have you found here? Worship is a very comprehensive term — isn’t it?” said the young lady, with a colour suddenly heightened, and looking at him with brilliant eyes.

Perhaps, if she had not blushed so ambiguously, he might have kept his temper better; but the feeling that, in the very act of snubbing him, she was exhibiting this beautiful evidence of so different a feeling with respect to that miserable coxcomb! Unaided human nature could hardly be expected to stand that.

“Worship — yes, quite true — a very comprehensive term. There are all sorts of worship. The Egyptians worshipped reptiles, and some people worship monkeys, I believe; and others, perhaps more degraded still, worship themselves.”

“Still enigmatical; but I think there can be no doubt that you intend to be — I’ll only say — *disagreeable*; and suppose there is a worship established here. I think I may do and say pretty much, here, what I like, without being considered intrusive. And, suppose Julia Wardell — oh! I see, she’s asleep — has committed the impiety of removing Mr. Charles Mannering from her altar, and the profanity of setting up Mr. Alfred Dacre instead, is not this a land of liberty? Hasn’t she a right to practice her idolatries according to her taste? I don’t see why the good old soul should not have her plurality of Josses, or whatever she calls her idols, or why the deposed divinity should thunder his displeasure in my small habitation, and the fact is, I don’t choose it.”

“You quite mistake me.”

“So much the better.”

“I don’t, at all, affect rivalry with the new divinity. I never had the distinction of standing upon an altar and receiving incense. It must be very pleasant, and judging from the enthusiasm, and the looks of the priestesses, there must be no small happiness, too, in the mere act of devotion.”

“Come now, do speak plainly — what do you mean?” said Miss Laura Gray peremptorily.

“In the practice of idolatry everything is allegory and myth. Isn’t it rather unreasonable to ask me to speak literally?” said Charles Mannering, pleased, perhaps, to see evidence of irritation on the other side.

“I suppose you are joking,” said the young lady. “If you have no meaning it is a bad joke, and if you have a meaning it is a worse one. I wish to know, once for all, what you do mean, if meaning you have any.”

“Well, I don’t mind telling you that it does strike me that an intimacy, which I suppose seems to other people quite natural, and *selon les règles* appears to have grown up, almost in an hour. I recognise the young gentleman as the same whom you thought so good-looking at the opera, the other night, and I suppose he has been properly introduced and all that, and that Ardenbroke, who is, I think, the only friend you have — of course I don’t include myself — with the slightest claim to offer advice on such a subject unasked, has told you all that is necessary to know — I assume that — but still, the very distinguished confidence, and, in fact, the intimacy with which I find that fortunate young gentleman received and entertained, at whatever hours it may suit him to drop in, does strike a person accustomed to see such relations grow up with a less tropical suddenness, as in the highest degree marvellous.”

“Well, thank you for some plain speaking at last, and considering you have no right, as you say, to offer advice unasked, you contrive to exercise the privilege of saying and insinuating more rude things than any other modest young gentleman I have had the good fortune to hear of.”

“You may resent it. I can’t help that,” said he, “but I think it would be neither kind nor right, if in a place like this city, I were to abandon you, with no more experience than a child, and no one but Mrs. Wardell to take care of you — Mrs. Wardell, who really knows very little more of the world than you do yourself — to the risk of being imposed on, or even compromised by your confidence in the professions of people who happen to turn up in a Babel so handsomely provided with sharks and sharpers, as London is.”

“We happen to know, not from himself, but from people who are perfectly informed, and whose authority even you would not dispute, that Mr. Dacre is a person whom there could be no possible objection to knowing. I say this, neither as admitting your right to demand explanations, nor to make offensive remarks, but simply as a matter of fact, and as showing that we do not commit such extravagances as, in your phrase, should compromise us.”

“That which we desire to believe, we do believe often upon very slender evidence,” said Charles Mannering.

“I don’t think you perceive how very offensive, I may say insulting, your little speeches have become. You can’t help making them, I dare say. I suppose people, in the main, act according to their natures, and yours is to say such pleasant things as you have entertained me with this evening. I take it for granted you must go on saying them, so I mean to go up to my room, not having Julia Wardell’s faculty of retiring into dreams and slumber; but, of course, you can waken her with one of those pretty speeches, as they wakened King Lear with music, and she has the advantage of a much better temper than I have.” And with these words the young lady left the room.

She had not blown up Charles Mannering with half the spirit she might, at another time. A sense of fear and anxiety had in some measure tamed that wayward creature, and her manner was not so fierce as her words.

When she got to her room — at every step fancying she saw the peeping face of the odious little man whom she had seen at the window, that night, and in the hall — she sat down and asked her maid all about the search that had been made.

Every nook and corner had been searched, not a sign of the slightest disturbance anywhere detected, and it was plain that the person who had entered the hall could have only stepped in, looked about him, and withdrawn.

In a minute more Miss Laura Gray heard the hall-door shut, and a step pass away upon the dry court. She knew that step. It was Charles Mannering taking his departure. She smiled faintly as she fancied his feelings, his dignity, and his huff; and then she thought uneasily whether there might not be reason at the bottom of his reclamations.

## CHAPTER XXIII.

### LAURA GRAY'S FORTUNE TOLD.

A SMALL letter was laid upon her dressing-table next morning, as she entered; Mrs. Wardell had, placed it there. She was relieved at the first glance. It was not from her unknown correspondent. It was addressed in an extremely pretty hand, and at the foot of the page was "A. Dacre."

"My Dear Miss Gray," it said, "you see how impatient I am to use my privilege. Lest your servants should omit to mention the circumstance, I have to relate, that on going downstairs, I learned from the servant that I had been honoured by an inquiry, as I conclude, from the same person who alarmed you by showing himself at the window, and who I have no doubt is implicated in the cowardly annoyance to which you have been exposed. I instantly pursued, but not a trace of him was discoverable. Any direction you may be so good as to honour me with, I shall be only too happy to obey, if you will be so good as to send, during my three days' absence, to my address, Minivers Hotel, &c.

"Believe me, my dear Miss Gray,

"Ever Yours, &c., &c.

"P.S. — I think the bravado of last night will materially aid discovery. The one talent I really do possess, that of the detective, I devote to this enterprise. I had twice in my life to employ it before, and very quickly succeeded. Pray burn this letter. There are those whom I would not wish to know that I wrote. I entreat of you therefore to be secret for three days."

When Miss Gray came down she questioned the servant who had opened the door to the unknown visitor of last night. When did he come? A few minutes before Mr. Dacre left. Did he knock or ring at the door; or how was it? He came with a postman's knock. Would the servant know him again? Yes, he was a low-sized, vicious-looking little wasp of a Jew — pale and surly. And what did he say? Only to, ask if Mr. Dacre was here, and he asked the servant if he was quite sure, and seemed irresolute what to do, like a man making up his mind to mischief, but away he went again, so quick he could not tell which way he took. That was the narrative.

Now, Miss Laura Challys Gray was beginning to grow dissatisfied, and to quarrel with herself about several things. In the first place, had she done wisely in snubbing her honest cousin, Charles Mannering, whom she really wished to consult — whom, however, she found herself, by an understood obligation of secrecy, unable to consult — in whose eyes, her reason told her, she must inevitably appear so strange — possibly her conduct so equivocal, and to whom she yet could give no explanation? Had she done wisely in admitting this stranger — Mr. Dacre — to such strangely confidential relations? Had she not acted in panic — without thinking — without consulting even the instincts of caution. The intimacy which had grown in a day or two between her and this Mr. Dacre, which seemed to her like a dream, did it not affright her at times? And, then, was she quite sure that the handsome hero of this little mystery, who had taken up her quarrel so goodnaturedly, or rather so enthusiastically, of whom she thought through every hour of the day almost, for his words and looks were inseparably associated with the subject which so rivetted her thoughts — was she quite certain that she cared as little for him as in prudence she ought? Altogether, would it not have been wiser, to open this matter, the importance of which she had possibly exaggerated immensely, to Lord Ardenbroke or Charles Mannering? It was now, however, too late; she could hardly remember how these relations with Mr. Dacre had come about. But, now, she felt she could not recede. There was really nothing against him. He had been zealous, but very respectful. He was a friend of Ardenbroke's. Whom better could she have employed? And so on, inconsistently.

She was low. Her novel did not please her, nor music, nor work; she had a headache; she did not care for a drive or a walk; her gardening wearied her; she was in a state of unavowed suspense; expecting news; none came.

In the afternoon, near the hedgerow that bounded the lawn of Guildford House, came a big drum and pandean pipes resounding shrilly, and the grave brown-faced showman set up the stage of "Punch and Judy," and the time-honoured play began.

Here was a diversion. Miss Gray, who happened at the moment to be in the library, sent for her opera glasses, threw open the window, and amused herself with the Hogarthian picture of the motley crowd and the showman, seen pleasantly in the dappled sunlight under the trees.

When this pleasure, like all others, came to its end, she sat with her glasses in her lap at the open window. In a little while, the crowd having marched off with the show-box and big-drum, there came to the gate a slender girl whom the person in the lodge would not allow to pass.

"She's a gipsy," thought Miss Gray, raising her glasses, and thus distinctly confirming her first impression. She touched the bell, and told the servant to tell the people at the gate to allow the girl to come up to the house.

Up came the girl — lithe, dark, handsome, smiling, with all the servile wildness of her race, with fine eyes, and brilliant little teeth.

"Send my maid here," said the young lady, not caring to be quite alone, though the window-stood interposed between her, and this wild child of fortune. "You can tell all that's going to happen us, can't you?" said the young lady, smiling with an odd mixture of curiosity, antipathy, and admiration upon her vagabond sister.

"Oh, yes, she would tell the pretty young lady her fortune, if my lady wished; she would look at her hand, and she hoped the pretty young lady would have everything she wished in the world, for, indeed, she was pretty enough to be a princess, and dress in gold and diamonds, and pearls, and marry a king," and so forth.

"Have you told many fortunes to-day?"

"A deal of fortunes to-day, my lady. Yes, a great many pretty young ladies, but not one so pretty as you; no, no, my lady, indeed."

"Would you like to have your fortune told? I'm going to have mine," said Miss Gray turning to her maid, who had that moment come in. What maid could refuse such an offer. And, so, with a giggle, and a little toss of her head, she submitted.

So, Miss Mary Anne Mersey's hand told its secrets, and promised that amiable person her heart's content, and a rich tailor for her husband, and, finally, the sibyl added —

"And you will find, very soon, something that will make the young lady, your mistress, wonder!"

"Oh! something! Of what kind?" inquired Miss Gray.

"I can't know that, my lady. She will find something that will give you a start; yes, indeed, my pretty lady."

"You mean that will frighten me, do you?"

"Yes, my lady, — that will frighten you."

"La! what can she mean?" exclaimed Miss Mary Anne.

"I suppose we shall both be frightened, Mersey; but it can't be helped, and you have certainly got a great deal to console you, for I don't think a single thing has gone wrong in your fortune."

"Very nice hand, yes, very lucky," acquiesced the smiling prophetess.

"But she's to find, something — how soon — that is to frighten me?" persisted the young lady.

"How soon is not fixed, but very soon, my lady. That will be by the stars."

"We shall learn time enough, Mersey, I dare say," and putting more money in her hand, with a smile, she extended her own for the chiromancer's examination.

"You will travel about a great deal," began the gipsy; "you will not settle at home for a long time."

"Hush! Mersey. You are not to say a word," said her mistress, warningly.

"And there's a handsome young gentleman in love with you, my lady, though you don't know it, and he will, maybe, be wounded shortly for your sake, maybe killed, and he'll leave you some money, for he's very rich, though you don't know it. He's young, and he's very handsome, and he loves you ever so much more than his life, and you'll marry some one, but I don't know whether him or no, and you saw him in a fair, or in a playhouse, maybe; some place where there was a show going on, and music, and that is all I'm sure about, my lady."

"And how soon is this unfortunate young gentleman to be killed or wounded in my service?" she asked, laughing.

"Ah! you would not laugh, pretty lady, if you saw the poor young gentleman bleeding."

"Oh! but you know there's a hope, isn't there, that he may not be hurt at all, and what I want to know is, how soon the time of danger is to come."

"Soon, my lady, it can't be more than a year, but it might be tomorrow morning, a letter might come; it is some time very shortly."

"Well, thanks. Now, I think, we know everything," said Miss Gray.

"Is there any more young ladies would like their fortunes told, in the house, pretty young lady?"

"No, no, thanks, no one, and I think we'll say goodbye now?" said Miss Laura Gray, with a smile and a little nod.

The handsome young prophetess smiled and showed all her little white teeth and curtsied, and crossed the windows here and there, and up and down with her restless glance, and so, smiling and curtsying again, with many "thankies, my ladies," and "good lucks," away she went.

"A very good fortune you have got, Mersey, and much good may it do you. I'm not so lucky quite. My young gentleman is to be shot; whoever he is, on very short notice too; and I'm to be frightened by something you are to be good enough to find for me. I shan't want you any more just now, Mersey."

Though the young lady knew that the gipsy was an impostor, and that, probably, the same prediction was repeated at every second window where she got a piece of money and an audience, yet, in her present mood, she would rather that the man at the lodge had taken his own way, and this little folly been omitted.



## CHAPTER XXIV.

### WHAT MARY ANNE MERSEY FOUND.

THAT evening was unrelieved by a single incident worthy of being recorded, and Miss Gray was early weary — no note had reached her; all was silent. She went early to her room.

"I'll leave this tiresome place, Mersey," she said; "I'll leave it in two or three weeks, I think; do you like it?"

"Like it — hates it — rayther, you mean, miss. I can't think whatever bewitched you, Miss Challys, to come to such a dismal hole of a place. I've sat up an hour at a time, in my window, crying my eyes out. I told you the day after we came, miss, you could not bear to live here no time. 'Tisn't a place where there's nothing to recommend it. 'Taint country, miss, and it aint town, no more; and when I look out of the window, them old trees, so like the churchyard at Gray Forest, and not a soul stirring, I do really, miss, I cries my eyes red again for downright lowness of spirits."

"I'm coming to the same way of thinking myself, Mersey; I believe I made a mistake when I came here. It's quite true, I hate what they call society, that is, balls and drums, and all that wear and tear, and racket, and fever; but then this is unnecessarily dull; and the fact is, it is so unnaturally quiet that I am growing quite nervous, and I believe a year of it would go very near making me mad."

"La, miss," rejoined Miss Mary Anne Mersey, who had been Laura's maid from Miss Gray's nursery days, and could consequently speak her mind fearlessly, "Of course it will make you mad. It is not natural, nor right, for young people to shut themselves up like that, and you so handsome, miss; a pretty thing with your fortune and all, you should go off into an old maid, with your fancies and vagaries."

Laura laughed, looking at her own pretty face in the glass before which she had seated herself. It seems to me a harmless satisfaction which young ladies seek in that sort of reflection.

"When you see me an old maid, as you shall, you need not trouble yourself about the causes of it, because I have weighed the matter well, and an old maid I'm resolved to be."

"Well, if I could? But, no, Miss Challys; I don't believe nothink of the sort. Why should you allow such an ungodly notion into your head?"

"Ungodly — is it? How?" inquired Miss Gray.

"Ungrateful to God, miss, for your wealth, and health, and beauty. Why, miss, it's only natural you should choose a fine, handsome young gentleman that will love you with all his heart and soul, and be a good husband, and make you a happy wife and a good mother of a family."

"Oh, Mersey! you suffocate me."

"There, now, already there's an uncommon nice young gentleman as ever you need wish to look at — that lovely young man, Mr. Dacres, and he's rolling in money besides."

Laura blushed brilliantly, and with flashing eyes said angrily —

"You could not have said a more absurd thing, Mersey, or a more awkward one. I almost think you are possessed. I'm obliged to see Mr. Dacre when he calls for half an hour in the evening. He has most particular business to speak of, and nothing could be more inconvenient than my being obliged to decline the information he is so good as to give me, and that, at any inconvenience, I should unquestionably do, if I thought any such monstrous folly could be talked by anyone upon the subject."

"And why should you feel like that, Miss Challys? How can you or me stop people talking if they likes it? And where could you see a handsomer or a nicer gentleman? And he has no end of money — and so generous he is. La, Miss Challys, dear. Old maid, indeed! What notions do come in your head, miss!"

"Well, Mersey, if you will talk like a fool I can't help it. Only I'd rather you talked of anyone but me. We'll go abroad, and see the world. You shall see such beautiful places — Paris and Rome, and Venice and Switzerland — and if there must be marrying you shall marry, for I wont. What do you say to a French restaurateur or an Italian artist?"

"Many thanks, miss; but I'm no more thinking of taking a husband than other people; and as for them foreigners, I can't abide the sight of them."

And as she whisked her handkerchief from her pocket at these hoitytoity words, a letter flew out on the floor. Taking it up she found the address to "Miss Gray, Guildford House."

"Letter to you, miss, please."

As she leaned back indolently in her low chair, the young lady received it, almost without looking, in her fingers; and it was not until she held it just under her eyes that she gave herself the trouble of looking at it. Turning pale, she exclaimed —

"My God! where did you get this?"

And, staring at it, she held it tightly pinched in her hand. Mary Anne Mersey was seared by the looks and exclamations of her young mistress.

"It fell out, miss. I think it must have been in my handkerchief — and — I don't know. In my pocket, leastways — and I don't know how in the world it ever has got there."

Miss Laura Gray might well be a little startled, for there, at a glance, she had recognised the broad, firm hand which had grown to her so horrible.

Miss Gray stood up straight. She recognised the evil face of this letter, and her heart sank.

Her maid, with a frown and her lips pursed, was peering curiously in her frightened face.

There was something beside the letter enclosed in the envelope — a small, hard substance. The odd emblem was on the seal as before, and the legend, "Choose which Dart."

She broke the seal, and impatiently plucked out the contents. The enclosure was a ring.

"This is so like my pearl ring!" she said, touching it with her finger, and looking, in her maid's face inquiringly. "When did I wear it last?"

"I thought you had it on now, miss."

"No, no; look there, on the ring-stand."

"It ain't there, miss, and 'tain't on your finger, and that's it, returned in the note. You must have dropped it when you were out, or forgot it on the counter, maybe, in some shop."

Miss Gray took it up and scrutinized it near the candle's flame.

"It *is* my ring — it *certainly* is. How *can* this have happened?"

"Wont the note tell you, miss?"

Miss Gray read it in silence.

"You have sent a fool on his last errand. I enclose you proof that I have been in your house, where for half an hour the sword hung over his head. In and out, up and down your house, like tame cats, we know pretty well what passes there, as you perceive. I have had the pleasure of sending you in succession two little reminders — a locket set with brilliants — and a pearl-hoop ring. On the day after tomorrow I shall have the honour to present you with a larger and more precious packet, containing a suitable memento of a meddler, viz., the right hand of Mr. Alfred Dacre packed in lint."

"What is the matter with you, miss; you look very bad," said her maid.

"Nothing, nothing, too late to send a message. What o'clock is it, Mersey?"

"Past ten, miss. Halfpast and three minutes, please."

"How much? Is it too late? I suppose we had better send tomorrow," said the young lady, with a puzzled air.

"Too late for what, miss, please?"

"Too late to send for Lord Ardenbroke, or — or for whom? Mr. Mannering — yes — yes — it must wait till morning."

"What is it, miss, nothing gone wrong, sure?"

"You had better run down and ask Mrs. Wardell, with my love, whether she can come up to me for a moment, or — no — don't mind. Stay here, please," she continued, in a suddenly altered voice. "I have, — let me think. Yes — Mary Anne Mersey, you must answer me honestly the questions I shall ask you. I'll begin at the beginning — let me think! I'm stunned, I believe — —"

Miss Mersey stood bridling a little, and looked from the corners of her eyes, in the young lady's face, expecting what might come.

## CHAPTER XXV.

### MARY ANNE MERSEY EXAMINED.

"WHERE did you get this letter, Mary Anne?"

"Where did I get it, Miss? La! It tumbled out of my pocket, when I pulled out my handkerchief."

"Oh, Mersey! How can you fancy I am to be put off so? How did you get possession of that letter? I must know. You know everything about it, and you *shall* tell me the truth."

"But I *don't* know, miss, as I hope to be *saved*, miss, I don't!"

"It's a conspiracy — it's a conspiracy; those that ought to love me best are my betrayers. Oh, Mersey! how could you? Why are you so changed; what have I done; how can you league yourself with such wretches?"

"But, miss, I've done nothing; may I choke if I tell you a lie."

"I'll know what you have done. Yes; you shall tell me everything. Come, Mersey, you had better tell me the truth, or I'll find those who will make you," said the young lady, with a sudden and fierce change of manner.

"I've nothing to tell, so help me!"

"Come, come, speak truth. Who gave you that letter?"

"No one, miss," she replied, with sturdy vehemence.

"Shame! Why you took it from your pocket!"

"No I didn't, miss. I didn't, please. No such thing. When I drew out my handkerchief, the letter was in it, and fell on the carpet, please, which you saw it yourself, miss."

"Then, by fair means, you'll tell me nothing?"

"Fair or foul, miss, I've nothing to tell. I haven't sawed nothing but what you have sawed yourself, miss, and I don't care who says it. I know no more about it than you do, miss."

Laura Gray paused, gazing in her face.

"I don't know what to think. I'm half distracted. Mersey, you look honest; you have been always a good girl. I conjure you, don't deceive me; now, tell me all you know about it."

"I do tell you, miss, and it's nothing. You, have made me ready to cry, you have; you misdoubt me so. It is very hard, it is."

And Miss Mary Anne Mersey began to whimper into her handkerchief.

"You need not cry, Mersey. It is I who should cry, if anyone cries. But here it's the fact. Some one in the house has been telling to people outside all that passes among us; our secret conversations, our visitors and their names, our plans; in short, everything. Who can it be? What am I to think? How can you have got this letter into your possession?"

"It must have stuck in my handkerchief, miss, by chance. No one gave it me. I never knew I had it till it fell on the floor, and I'll make oath to that anywhere you like, miss."

"It was not in the Postoffice. It has no mark. It must have come by a messenger's hand. Some of the servants, then, must have put it into your pocket when you weren't looking. No, Mersey, it was only for a moment the doubt took possession of me, in this great perplexity. I am sure you would not aid in this cruel annoyance. But there are persons in this house who do, and who betray us to dangerous people outside, and repeat everything that passes among us."

"I wonder could it have been that fortuneteller; I was just thinking, miss. But she was standing outside, and we looking. I don't think she could."

"That did not strike me. They are such thieves, and do such things with so much sleight of hand. I should not wonder if it *were* she. I dare say it was."

Miss Laura Gray paused, thinking.

"But I think I had seen her, or felt her; I'm sharp enough that way," said Mary Anne.

"Not so sharp as she thought. Those people live by roguery and sleight of hand. The more I think of it, the more likely it seems. Don't you remember she said that you would find something that would frighten me? Yes; and that some one would be in danger within a short time? It is only a guess though."

"Yes, your sweetheart, miss," said Mary Anne Mersey, thoughtfully.

Laura Gray blushed, and turned her eyes angrily on her maid, but there was not a suspicion of slyness; a grave and perfect good faith, on the contrary.

"Well, there *is* a gentleman in danger, though he is nothing whatever of the kind, and if not in danger, actually, at all events, threatened with injury; and as I don't fancy that gipsies are inspired, I believe she must have been told to say those things, and the only persons who could have told her are those who employ themselves in writing these letters — I mean this letter that fell from your handkerchief — don't you see? Well, then, if that is so, all the rest is plain; for the same people who gave her her instructions wrote the letter, perhaps, but it is only conjecture; and is there any use in telling you to keep it secret? Will you promise to tell no one a word of what has passed, for two or three days, until, at least, I give you leave?"

"Not to Mrs. Wardell, miss?"

"Certainly not; but I meant particularly to the servants," said the young lady.

"Oh, no, miss, sure!" said Miss Mersey, so loftily that Laura felt almost moved to beg her pardon for having admitted a suspicion so vulgar.

"Mersey, you must sleep in this room tonight; I am so nervous. I dare say I'm a great fool, but I can't help it; and in the morning, with God's blessing, I shall have advice, and take steps to prevent all this. You know this ring — my pearl-hoop — I did not wear it yesterday?"

"I can't say, Miss; I'm not quite sure."

“Did I the day before?”

“I’m sure you wore it within the last three or four days, but I could not be sure which was the last, miss.”

“Very well, Mersey, but you must not say a word of it; it will put people in this house on their guard if you do. That ring was taken out of this house, and has been returned; and it is not the first proof I have had that we are watched, and betrayed.”

## CHAPTER XXVI.

### CHARLES MANNERING'S MISSION.

AT about eleven o'clock next morning, Charles Mannering knocked at the door of Guildford House. He had received an earnest little note, saying,— "If I was cross the other night, pray forgive me. I seriously want your help now. Don't say so to Mr. Gryston, or to any other person. No one is to know that you suspect that anything has gone wrong, or that I want advice but come, and listen to the very odd story I have to tell, and, by doing so, you will help to relieve me of a real anxiety, and possibly save me from a real danger."

He was full of curiosity, and a masculine belief in the trivial nature of this feminine complication. Wondering, too, why he had been directed in a postscript to say nothing about the matter to her cousin, Julia Wardell. Now and then an unpleasant fancy that she might have glided into a romance, and begun to lose her way in its mazes, startled him with a momentary pang.

"A shark — a fortune-hunter, very likely — how could she be so mad? But, after the vows she is fond of repeating, it is hardly credible that she should dream of throwing herself away upon that fellow, of whom she knows absolutely nothing."

In came Charles. He had not seen Laura Gray in the drawingroom window — but as he put off his coat in the hall, she opened the library door, and called him in.

"First of all — we are good friends, you know?" said the young lady.

You may quarrel with me, but I'll not quarrel with you, Challys," said he, looking at her very kindly and gently.

So she put out her hand to him, and there was another greeting, silent, but very friendly — and he said with a smile —

"Well, now, Challys, as we used to say at school, what's the row?"

"Shut the door — sit down there, and I'll tell you. It's a long story, Charles, and I'll begin at the beginning."

And so she did, and Charles listened, and gravely read the documents as she placed them in his hands, but when he came to the last he laughed. She looked with something of surprise and reproof at him — and he laughed the more.

"Well, really this is too good," he exclaimed.

"Too bad, I should have thought."

"You don't mean to say you believe it?" said Charles Mannering.

"Believe what?" she demanded.

"This rubbish."

"What rubbish, sir? Do, pray, Charles Mannering, speak intelligibly, if you mean me — but perhaps you don't — to understand you."

"Can you really believe that you are to receive Mr. Dacre's hand — might it not be better to send his foot, the member he has put in it — made up in paper, and directed to Miss Gray, tomorrow evening? Can you really have brought yourself to believe such a piece of incredible burlesque?"

"The whole thing, up to that, is incredible, and yet it has happened. Here, this locket for one thing. I asked Fleurise and Boyd what it is worth, and they say sixty guineas, and that it must have cost more than a hundred. Is it credible that any one should give away — to a total stranger — sixty guineas? You know it is monstrous. Is it credible, that the names of our visitors, and all my plans — though I scarcely speak them above my breath — should be known to people totally unknown to me — who yet seem resolved, by a kind of torture, to influence my conduct, and are animated by a hatred of that miserable Mr. Guy de Beaumirail, and who have discovered Mr. Dacre's pursuit of them, and threaten to put him out of the way. It is like a dream."

Charles Mannering listened patiently.

"And the night before last, while you were here, there came to the window of this room a wicked-looking little man — and the same little demon I saw just as I reached the drawingroom door, stepping into the hall; I felt, for a moment, as if I should have fainted, and I had the house searched, but there was no one; and only ten minutes later he came to the hall-door, and inquired whether Mr. Dacre was in the house. You see they have a system of spies and messengers — and my pearl ring was taken away, and returned — merely to show that somehow they have access to the house, and that nothing is secure from them. Most unscrupulous they have proved themselves — cunning and savage — and their language is ferocious — and I can't in the least comprehend their schemes. And now I ask you, in the midst of this odious labyrinth, what am I to think or do?"

She paused, and as he did not tell her, she continued— "What am I to believe? I saw only the other day, in the newspaper, the discovery of a dead body described — supposed, it said, to be that of a French gentleman, who left his lodging about ten days before. See how easy it is to murder without detection, in this great, wicked city — and, this morning, there is an account of some pieces of a human body, part of a foot and ankle — you will see it in the newspaper — tied up in a basket under the seat of a railway carriage, where it was left by some unknown person. And now, with all this, and things like it, continually happening in this vicious city, you say it is incredible that a stranger like Mr. Dacre should be murdered and cut in pieces. I won't argue more about it, it is disgusting, and frightful, and has haunted me all night."

"Relieve your mind upon that point, however; it was simply said to terrify you. I assure you such a hoax would not have been attempted upon any one but an inexperienced girl like you — the idea of giving you notice! Do you fancy that a murderer meditating such a thing would apprise you beforehand, when you would merely have to send a friend to mention the matter to the police, to have detectives placed all about to secure the examination, and the person, if need be, of every messenger who came to your door."

"You want to comfort me, Charles; it is very kind; but your argument won't do. I thought of all that. But, suppose a very nice carriage, with servants and all proper appointments, were to drive up to the door, in the afternoon, and a nice old lady to inquire particularly how I was, and leave a card, and also a parcel, would not that pass muster? or, suppose the public carrier should deliver the parcel; or one of my tradespeople, to whose shop it might be brought, should innocently send it here — there are so

many ways of doing such a thing, with almost no risk of detection, and people who can deliver a letter like that here, and nobody be able to say how it came, could certainly do what they threaten. The best way, as it strikes me, to prevent their sending, is to apprise Mr. Dacre, who is primarily interested, of their designs."

"Have you the least idea or suspicion who these people may be?" asked he.

"None; but Mr. Dacre, who knows Mr. de Beaumirail, suspects, notwithstanding the ostentation of hatred assumed by these people, that he may really be implicated in the conspiracy — you men understand one another better than I can — but I don't very clearly see how that is possible."

"Nor I, either. I have been making inquiries about De Beaumirail, and I believe he is very ill indeed. I don't say, from all I hear, that he would have very many scruples about taking a part in a disreputable enterprize, although I don't quite know that he might not; but he is very ill. Gryston told me yesterday that he should not be surprised if he were dead, and buried, in a month."

"Well, well, well, what of that?" said the young lady, impatiently.

"Not much; only this, that being so, I don't see how, in any imaginable way, he could be of the slightest use to these conspirators, as you will give them that lofty title; a parcel of cowardly blackguards, London thieves, and swindlers, I suppose — the first letter written in the character of an Aristides, and the last in the language of an assassin."

"That is not a reassuring view of the matter, Charlie; but something, you know, must be done."

"In any way you please to employ me, you have only to command me," said he.

"Thanks, Charlie; I know that," said she, gravely.

"Well, what shall I do? Shall I go to the police office?" he asked.

"No, pray; that would be a very public step," she said.

"We must take care to secure your house against the impertinences of these people, and I think the best way would be simply to tell the police; and I'll do that, if you'll allow me."

"Well, no; I say I should not like yet, at least. But do you know Miniver's Hotel?"

"Oh, yes; everyone knows that. Do you wish me to go there?"

Yes; you'll go there, and see Mr. Dacre."

"But I haven't the pleasure of Mr. Dacre's acquaintance," he said, a little dryly, as if he did not desire it; "and I don't believe he's in a bit more danger than I am; and — you'll think me a great brute; but it is as well to be frank — I really don't very much care. I don't think I ever saw a fellow in whom I felt less interest."

"Well, you will, I am sure, for my —" and she paused.

"For your sake! Oh, that's a different thing! for your sake, of course;" he laughed oddly. "You fancy an unseen circle of assassins round him, and I'm to break it for the purpose of warning him of his danger, and so diverting their fire upon me. But what of my unworthy life or person? For your sake, Challys — of course, I should go with pleasure."

"But I didn't say for my sake — you know I didn't," said she.

"You were going to say it, and you know you were," said he. "Come, Challys, you used to love truth, and I won't believe, till you tell me so yourself, that change of place will ever change frank Challys Gray."

"I did not say it, Charlie," she answered; "but it is true I was on the point of saying it; and now I do say it — for my sake you will go there and see him, for he must be communicated with; and as he undertook the search after those people, for my sake, I do ask you, for my sake, to relieve my mind, by apprising him of that which, right or wrong, I cannot help believing may be a real danger."

"Yes, Challys, that form of invocation is, for me, irresistible. I will go; although I could hardly have imposed a more disagreeable duty — not, of course, that I bear him any ill-will, for I don't even know him, but that he is evidently such a — what can I say without giving offence? I was going to say such a prig, but I won't; but he is just the kind of conceited fellow who would meet one with those airs which I confess I can't endure."

"You mistake him very much, I assure you; when you know him a little you will like him extremely," said Miss Laura Challys Gray, with that grave and gentle reserve, which, in jealous minds, excites suspicion.

"Well, what am I to tell him?"

"Tell him all I have related to you, that is, all that has happened since you and he were here to tea, the evening before last; he knows everything up to that."

"Does he? Oh!"

"Yes. I'll tell you some other time how that came about." She blushed. "You need not smile — there is nothing whatever to smile at."

"Nor to blush at?" said he.

"Nor to blush at," she repeated, with a flash from her fine eyes — "neither to smile nor to blush at. It may strike you as very ridiculous, to me it is a serious anxiety."

"Now, now, Challys, you must not quarrel with me so soon again."

"Quarrel? No. You'll understand it all perfectly, some day — that is, when there are five minutes to tell it in, but now there ain't. Just tell him you come from me — tell him everything — learn all you can, and return here — Charlie, you are a very a kind fellow," and she gave him her hand.

So away went Charles Mannering upon his mission.

## CHAPTER XXVII.

### HE RETURNS.

I DON'T care to analyze the feelings with which he undertook this service for handsome Mr. Dacre. If they were of an unfriendly kind, he was not fool enough to allow his churlish feelings to show themselves in his demeanour. With his usual frank bearing and cheery tones he inquired for Mr. Dacre at Miniver's Hotel.

The hall-porter told him that he had orders to receive letters addressed to Mr. Alfred Dacre, if that was the name, but he did not know whether the gentleman was staying in the house. If he was, it must have been since this morning; and, on inquiry, it turned out that no gentleman of that name was at Miniver's.

"Does he call for his letters, himself?"

"No one has called yet, sir."

"Was it he himself who ordered his letters to be taken in here?"

The hall-porter here inquired of the waiter.

"No, sir, a gentleman known in the house ordered it."

Into the coffee-room went Charles, and wrote this note —

"Miniver's Hotel.

"MY DEAR MR. DACRE,

"Our friends at Guildford House requested me this morning to call, and, if possible, see you, in order to mention some circumstances which I find it impossible to detail in a note; but if you will be good enough to send me a line, to my rooms, at the Temple, No — , — court, naming any hour this afternoon, after three, I shall be happy to meet you at Miniver's.

"&c. &c."

With the hall-porter he left his letter.

"Have you any idea where Mr. Dacre is at present staying in London?"

"No, sir."

Well, he had honestly done his best, and could return to Laura Gray with a clear conscience. He would have a talk with her, and after luncheon return to town and see whether a note had arrived for him at his chambers, and if this failed, there was nothing for him to reproach himself with — nothing that Miss Gray could censure.

When he reached Guildford House, and walked up under the shadow of the elm boughs, Laura Gray was not among her flowerbeds, nor in the library window — her yesterday's looking out from that window had not been lucky. But, from the drawingroom window, she was already looking out for him. On its pane he heard a tapping, as he approached; on looking up he saw her raising the sash.

He smiled and nodded, but she looked very grave, and beckoning him to quicken his pace, she leaned over the window-stone, and asked — "Any news?"

"No, nothing at present; but, by-and-bye, I shall hear."

"Nothing bad?"

"Nothing; nothing whatever. I'll run up and tell you everything — which, in fact, is just nothing."

As he traversed the hall and mounted the stairs his heart was sore and angry.

"She did not even say, thank you, and she has known me from the time she was beginning to walk and talk, and her head is full of that d — d fellow, just because he is a little handsome — though, hang me, if I can see it. How capricious and cruel and worthless they are!"

"Well, here I am," he said, cheerfully, as he entered the drawingroom, "about as wise as I went away," and with this preface he told her what had passed. "And now I have told my pointless story. Suppose we come out, the day is so delightful, among your flowers, and sit in that rustic seat there under the shade, and I promise to answer all your questions, if you still have any to put?"

"Come, then; I'll show you how I get; on at my gardening, and you shall admire the flowers; and shall I make a confession? I have grown such a fool, I have been shut up here all day; I have been afraid almost to look out of the window to-day, lest I should see one of those horrible gipsies. I am quite sure that girl brought the letter that came yesterday, and slipt it into Mersey's pocket while she was pretending to tell her fortune, and then she said things that showed a knowledge of what those wicked people intended. I sometimes feel as if she was a witch, and sometimes as if she was a cheat; and I really am so nervous and ridiculous that you would pity me. But, under your protection, I think I may venture."

So, without waiting to get her hat, down she ran, and led the way to the steps, and together they descended to the shorn grass, and the brilliant flowers.

With a childish eagerness and volatility she talked over the perfections of her flowers, her plans and operations, and, for a time, her whole soul was wrapped up in these themes.

"I'm a good listener, Laura, don't you allow?"

"Yes, very good."

"A man, as a rule, I think, is a better listener than a woman," said he.

"Does not that depend on the subject a good deal?" said she.

"Well, I grant you, the fashions, the scandals — —"

"Don't be impertinent."

"I believe I was very near being impertinent, for I was thinking of speaking the truth."

"Now, come, do be civil; it is a charming day, and here are we among the flowers, and I disposed to be perfectly polite, and what on earth happiness can there be in simply spoiling a tolerable half-hour by wanton incivility, I can't understand."

"But it is not wanton incivility — it has a purpose — I'm coming to my point."

"Oh! Then it is in cold blood?"

"Quite — and very harmless, as you'll see. I have observed, that on a tolerably interesting subject a man will listen a great deal better than a woman, as a *rule*; but when a woman listens to such yarns, it is because, though the talk can't interest her, the talker does."

"Well, I'm interested by the talk at present; pray go on."

"I'm quite sure it is not by the talker," he said with a laugh, which didn't quite conceal his pique; "but I was going to say, the other night, when I drank tea here, when that interesting young gentleman, Mr. Dacre, whose hands are expected here this evening, made up, I believe, in parcels, was entertaining you near the drawingroom window, although I could swear there was not a word of sense in all he said — I never saw a human being so engrossed by language as Miss Challys Gray was by his."

"Oh, really! It is so good of you, I'm sure, to interest yourself in these things; but, somehow, I can't feel at all obliged, as I suppose I ought, and if you fancy that I'm going to account to you for everything I say or do, you'll find yourself very much mistaken." She had blushed brilliantly and was vexed. "And if you wish that we should continue friends, you'll not repeat the attempt," Miss Challys continued, spiritedly.

"I do wish that we should continue friends, Challys — real friends, and that can only be on a footing of perfect frankness. You resent my assuming the airs of an adviser — I don't dream of taking that character upon myself, except as you invite, or at least, permit it; but you are very young, and Mrs. Wardell is, in some respects, as easily duped as a child, and cannot, therefore, be relied upon to warn you of the kind of danger to which an heiress, so young and charming as you, is exposed, when left so much to herself."

"You seem to fancy me a fool — you always talk in that tone," complained Laura.

"If I ever talk in that tone, it is when I am vexed, and I myself foolish. It is because I honestly think you so clever, that I think it is a pity you should not be reminded of those facts and omissions, on which you are so capable of forming a sound judgment. Now, I only ask, and that

"Do you understand the signs of those clouds? I wonder what kind of weather we are going to have."

"Not, weatherwise, Challys — no," he answered, with a sigh, and a smile, and a little shake of the head, as they walked towards the steps; "not weatherwise — in *any* way."



## PART II

### CHAPTER I. A KNOCKING AT THE DOOR.

WHEN Charles Mannering reached his rooms at the Temple, it was nearly three o'clock. In his letter-box was a note in that pretty, but not unmanly hand which Miss Laura Gray had seen and admired also. "A. D." in the corner of the envelope indicated the writer, who said —

"DEAR MR MANNERING, — Thank you so much, for your note, which has just reached me. I am at this moment so engaged — I fancy upon the subject of your message — that it is out of my power to name an hour for a meeting. Sometime to-day, however, I certainly shall call at your rooms, in the Temple, on the chance of finding you there.

Believe me, yours very truly,  
"ALFRED DACRE."

"If he thinks I'm going to wait here all day for him, he flatters himself," said Charles, throwing the note on the table. "That sort of fellow gets so spoiled by women — they are such fools — that they think they may do as they please with us."

And he laughed scornfully, and took his hat and umbrella and walked down the stairs again, and went off to his club.

It was all done in a spirit of defiance to this admirable Mr. Dacre, who assumed that Charles Mannering would wait for him, and was to learn that he was to wait on Charles Mannering.

He did not go again to his rooms till eight o'clock, although, if the truth were confessed, he was a little curious, and would have liked very well to hear what Dacre had to say, if only he could have managed to snub him a little at the same time.

Up the silent stairs, and into his lonely room, by his latchkey, went he. The papers he expected were on his table, some letters also, but no note in the hand with which he was now acquainted, with "A. D." in the corner of the envelope.

So he had called, and tried to get in, and was, no doubt, surprised to discover that Charles Mannering had taken such a liberty as to go out, without having made provision for his reception.

Charles smiled faintly with a grim satisfaction as he pictured to himself the incredulous mortification of this conceited young gentleman, when he found himself obliged to turn about on the lobby, and go downstairs as he came up.

So he sat down in his easy-chair, with his candles, and not till an hour later was startled from the study of his papers, in which he was now deep, by a knocking at his door.

On opening it he saw, standing in the moonlight admitted by the lobby window, a gentleman in a loose coat and a felt hat, whom he had no difficulty in recognising as Mr. Dacre.

Oh, Mr. Mannering!" he said, raising his hat, and his handsome features smiling in the moonlight, looked as if they were fashioned of ivory.

"Pray come in. I hope you did not call while I was out? I should have waited here, but business compelled me to go out for a time," said Charles Mannering, surprised into politeness and I fear a momentary disregard of truth.

"Thank you. No, I did not call — in fact I could not — until now. So fortunate to have met you."

As he now stood, in the light of the room, face to face, Charles Mannering confessed to himself, with a twinge of chagrin, what a very handsome fellow Dacre unquestionably was.

"You were so good as to say you would give me some information when we met," said Dacre after they had talked a little. "The subject of course is — —"

"The anonymous correspondence with which Miss Gray has been so shamefully annoyed. It's a mere burlesque, but it is not less an annoyance." And he went on to recount all that Miss Gray had related, and particularly the threat of sending her Mr. Dacre's hand, at which Charles laughed heartily, and the handsome Mr. Dacre laughed also, but not so comfortably, looking at his slender hand and wrist, which he moved under his eye, as if measuring in his mind whereabouts the line of amputation would be traced.

"Very laughable, but very curious; I'll tell you how just now," said he. "But I hope, so much Miss Gray does not mind it."

"The whole thing worries and frightens her. I don't think she believes all that; but she is nervous and uncomfortable."

"It can't be otherwise," said Dacre; "and I'm afraid she suffers even more than she need."

"I'm thinking of applying to the police about it," said Charles Mannering.

Dacre shrugged —

"I can't help it if you do; but the whole thing falls through-mind, I tell you that, and I know more about it than I did yesterday. It would be the greatest pity in life to let those miscreants off."

"You seem to think rather seriously of it," said Charles.

"I have reason," said Dacre, with a faint smile. "You are advising Miss Gray in this miserable business?" he asked gently but suddenly.

"I can hardly say advising, because it seems to me that for the present she has made up her mind to do nothing. I undertook her little message to you, in Lord Ardenbroke's absence — as a friend of yours he would have naturally undertaken it."

"He is out of town, then?"

"Yes — likely to remain away for some weeks," said Charles Mannering.

"Yes; Ardenbroke and I were very intimate long ago. He knows everything about, me. We Dacres are a scattered family. You are aware that this little visit of mine to London is made under peculiar circumstances. I'm under a condition which embarrasses me extremely. I undertook it entirely to oblige other people; but it prevents my putting myself in the way of recognition. My little

mission — a labour of love — would be spoiled entirely if I declared myself. As it has turned out, I am sorry I accepted the condition. If I were in a position to avow myself, I would act with infinitely more decision — infinitely; but without what would now amount to cruelty to, others — a terrible disappointment in fact, and something amounting, after all the trouble I've submitted to, and the condition of reserve, to *ridicule*, as respects myself — I hope in a week, certainly in a fortnight, it will be at an end, and then you will quite understand; you will see clearly how I was circumstanced. No one was ever by nature so little qualified to maintain a mystery, and I assure you it is the most irksome thing I ever undertook. I did not think it would have lasted a week altogether, and I find myself already a fortnight under my incognito, and likely to continue so for as much longer. If I were relieved of it, I could be of very great and immediate use."

"It's a great pity you can't," said Charles.

"Yes," said Dacre, "but apart from cruelty, to declare myself at this moment would make me ridiculous, and of course I could not think of doing it — Honour — yes, honour — God bless it — we all respect and wish it well; but honour, as you'll see in a few days, has nothing to do with this question of 'reserve or no reserve;' to declare myself has nothing to do with honour, but it would have a very distinct connexion with absurdity, and that fantastic spirit, *ridicule*, is the scourge of mankind. There are degrees, you know. Honour stands high; we sacrifice our lives to honour, but honour sometimes to fortune, and fortune itself at times to *ridicule*. *Ridicule*, therefore, sits supreme: no thunder so stunning as its titter, no tropical lightning like the half-hidden gleam of its eye, no crashing hurricane like its whisper. You've found it so, and so did I, and so does all the world. Pray forgive my interruption — talking nonsense while weighty matters call you away — — " he glanced at the papers on the table, "so, with many apologies, I'll say goodnight."

With a smile he was about to turn to the door, but Charles Mannering interposed —

"Pray, one word more. You used the phrase curious; you said that this affair was very curious, you recollect, and you were good enough to say you would tell me how by-and-by."

"Oh? a little curious naturally yourself."

Mr. Dacre smiled, and returned a step or two to the table.

## CHAPTER II.

### ONE — TWO — THREE.

“YES,” continued Mr. Dacre, “I’ll tell you why I said it was curious. It was *apropos* of that part of your story which recounted the threat in the letter, which promised to send, as a present to Miss Gray, my poor hand, made up in lint. It is highly melodramatic, and even comical; but it is also curious, because I was fired at last night.”

“Fired at? Really! Are you serious?”

“Quite serious, although, perhaps, the subject is a little ridiculous; because I do believe if they had shot me, from what I have reason to know of them, if they are the villains I suspect, this hand of mine would have been left at the door of Guildford House, precisely as they promised, this evening.”

Surely you have taken some steps — I should certainly acquaint the police,” said Charles, incredulous, but still a good deal shocked.

“Very kind of you, but it is already done — there is no objection to that. They don’t know that I connect them with the attempt. What I must conceal is the fact that I have got a clue by which I may yet reach them with certainty.”

“How was this attempt made, Mr. Dacre — where did it happen?”

“I’ll tell you. Do you know a road near Islington, where they are building a church or a meeting-house — a large place of worship, with three great trees growing in a clump beside it? There is a dead wall opposite, and a portion of the building has hardly risen above the foundations. I had driven to a place called Duckley-row, close to that, to see an accountant on business for a few minutes. As I got out of my cab, I saw some one get out of another, on the other side of the street, and he walked slowly up and down as if looking for a particular house. That is all I recollect of him. He was so employed when I went into Mr. Edgecombe’s house.”

“You did not see him fire at you?”

“I could not say whether it was he. I have only that unreasoning, intuitive belief, on which all my life I have so much relied, that it was the same man, that he was there watching me, and that he waited for, followed, and fired at me when I came out.”

“How did it happen, exactly?”

“The road in front of the building I’ve mentioned is very much cut up, with very deep ruts, so I told the driver to take his cab down and wait for me about fifty yards beyond it, where the trees are. As I reached the front of the building I was fired at, and a bullet struck the road a few yards before me. I turned about and saw the flash of a second shot which passed over my shoulder, close by my head.”

“How far away?”

“I should say about five-and-thirty yards. The shot came from the field close by the road, and over the fence, and that part of the road was in deep shadow. I was going on at a good pace, and picking my steps, zig-zag, and this it was, I think, that saved me.”

“It could not have been a pistol at that distance,” said Charles.

“Quite too far, too much force, too loud a report, and a devilish stinging whistle by my ear. No one but a mug would have tried a pistol at that distance. I had one then, I have one now” — he lifted a revolver from his coat pocket — “but I did not think of using it at thirty yards. I ran back to have my chance at close quarters, but he had run for it, and so I returned with my hand in my pocket, and not in that of Miss Gray’s correspondent. Will you kindly tell Miss Gray that I have better hopes than ever of bringing those villains to justice, or at least to submission; and I really must say good night at last; good night.”

Charles Mannering accompanied him to the door, holding a candle.

“Don’t mind, pray don’t,” said he.

But Charles was determined to be polite, and he saw, leaning with his back to the wall, a small man with a loose black wrapper about him, and a low-crowned felt hat. He seemed to have been waiting for Mr. Dacre, and he had taken up a position on the lobby between his door and the descending flight of stairs.

“More than fifteen minutes waiting; you said ‘twouldn’t be five,’” said this figure, snarling with something of the peculiar intonation of the Jewish race.

Charles thought he saw Mr. Dacre make a slight gesture of caution, but his back was turned and he was moving towards this discontented person, while at the same time Mr. Dacre said quietly, “That’s right — a cab waiting? Do you get on and see.”

The little man in the black wrapper, Charles felt, looked at him from under the leaf of his broad hat, before running downstairs, which he did without saying another word. He thought this person was affecting to be a servant, a character which Dacre seemed to put upon him, and so, he first and Dacre following, they went down the stairs. Charles Mannering stepped to the window on the lobby, and looking out saw these two persons walking side by side, as it seemed in confidential talk, toward the Temple-bar entrance of this series of quadrangles. He made up his mind to join them, got his hat in a moment, and shutting the door, ran downstairs. Here was, perhaps, some light to be had upon the right reading of Mr. Dacre’s mystery. He would go boldly up and join him, he did not care a farthing what he thought. He owed a duty to his cousin — second or third we must allow, but still his kinswoman — Miss Laura Gray, and every material for conjecture was valuable.

They must have quickened their pace very much, however, for they had already got out of sight. Following the direction they had taken, on entering the next square, he saw *three* persons walking rapidly into that which lay beyond it. In two of these he thought he recognised Dacre and the little man in the loose black coat; but they had got round the corner too quickly, and were too far away for certainty.

Charles had got into the spirit of the chase, and — shall I tell it? — he actually ran a part of the diagonal distance in hopes of overtaking them. He was saved from an awkward success, however, by the speed with which the shorter distance was traversed by these three persons, and he got in time to the lamp near Temple-bar to see a cab door shut, and Dacre, from the window, smiling a farewell to him, and his hand waving as it drove away. He would have liked to pursue, but there was no cab at hand, and a moment after he bethought him how unwarrantable and even outrageous his pursuit would have been, and returned to his rooms, recovered from his momentary intoxication, and very well pleased that he had failed.

## CHAPTER III.

### AN INVALID.

DACRE sat back in the cab, the sole of one foot on the, edge of the opposite cushion. The little man in the black wrapper sat beside him, and opposite that unknown person sat a burly gentleman, with broad shoulders and a florid face, and an expression of sly self-confidence.

It was the pleasure of Mr. Dacre to be silent, and these gentlemen, as in the presence of one of superior rank, when they spoke together, did so in an under tone, advancing their heads.

At last Mr. Dacre, no doubt amused by his ruminations, burst into a sarcastic laugh, which having indulged without vouchsafing any explanation to his companions, who seemed to count for next to nothing, he relapsed into silence.

This silence lasted till they had nearly reached St. Paul's Churchyard, when Mr. Dacre produced a cigarette, and with a laconic "Light, please," procured from the little person beside him that necessary appliance.

The cigarette did not last long, and when it was expended he looked, for the first time, out of the window.

"Is it far to this house?" he asked of anyone who might please to answer.

"Quite near," said the little man at his elbow.

He continued to look listlessly from the window, humming an air. They had turned up, to the left, a street near Cheapside.

"If it's much further, you may go on, gentlemen, if you like, but I shall leave you and go home."

The cab drew up, however, almost as he spoke.

"This is it — here's the house," which he pronounced *oushe*.

"You'd better go and try whether he can see us," said Dacre, in the same careless, haughty way.

Out got the little man; the door was already open, and he asked the dowdy maid who stood by it —

"How is Mr. Gillespie tonight?"

"Poorly, sir."

"Well enough to see us, do you think — two gentlemen with me — expecting us — eh?"

"Didn't hear, sir."

"You know me?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, I'll go up and ask him how he does."

He went to the cab window first.

"She says he's ailing," said the little man at the window. "Shall I run up and see?"

"Are you sure it's only gout?"

"That's the ticket — gout it is."

"Well, tell him he'd better see me *now*, for I'm hanged if I come here again."

And Mr. Dacre leaned back again in his cab, and waited silently for the return of the little gentleman in the black wrapper.

"He'll do himself that honour," said the little man, in a tone of ceremonious banter, himself opening the cab-door for Mr. Dacre, who jumped out and ran up the steps, followed by the gentleman in black, and the athletic gentleman with the florid face and broad shoulders.

"He says two of us is as much as he can stand," said the little man to the sly philanthropist, who thereupon nodded, and disengaging a short pipe from his pocket, enjoyed a smoke before the steps.

The little gentleman in black being more at home than his companion, led Mr. Dacre upstairs, and knocking at the drawingroom door, introduced him.

Mr. Gillespie was seated in an easy-chair, with his hand in flannel, and a table with several phials and a tablespoon, with a drop of some undesirable fluid drying in its hollow.

The invalid was that gentleman with a long, square head and white hair whom we saw before in the same box with Mr. Dacre at the opera.

"Can't get up, sir, to receive ye — laid here, sir — in tether — gout — nae respecter o' persons — ye'll excuse me."

"I'd rather you didn't under any circumstances. I hate a fuss," said Dacre, taking a chair. "I shouldn't think of treating you with any ceremony."

"Ye'r right, sir, ye'r verra right — we'll go straight to the point, sir — each wi' other — and what for no?" said the old gentleman drily, with a little wag of his head. "Ye might a fetched lawyer Larkin here, too, for 'twas after his pipe the jig began. I'd a liked verra well to see him here."

"I think there are quite enough here as it is," said Mr. Dacre, "unless, as Mr. Larkin is so religious, you might have enjoyed his conversation in your present invalided state."

"Never you fash your beard a-bout that," said Mr. Gillespie, who, in his sick-room and gouty collapse, was talking in the broad Scotch of his early days. "I'll do weel enough. I had enough and mair o' that sort o' claverin in my young days, in Glasgow, to last me the leave o' my years — d — them! I tell ye, sir, there's mair hypocrisy and downright wickedness comes o' their cant and rant, and Sabbath rules, than is to be found in the same compass in a' the world beside. But there's not much amiss wi' me. Ye'r not to suppose I'm coming out o' this feet foremost. I'll be all right again, mon, in nae time, — only a touch o' the gout — deil gae wi't."

"Now, Mr. Gillespie, you give me the paper," said Dacre. "It's growing late."

"H'm! Well, I've been thinking o' that," said the invalid.

"So have I," said Mr. Dacre.

"And it's all settled," interposed the little gentleman in black, with a surly and pallid face, and prominent dark eyes.

"An' what for no? Why deil flee awa' wi' ye, mon, d'ye think, loss or no loss, I'd think o' backing out o' my bargain; na, na, Mr. L. But this I say, sir, it's a very great confidence and a trust I would na' think o' placing if 'twere na' for the undoubted respectability o' the party; ye ha' known me a long time, sir, and I think yell say I've been of use to you on occasion."

"You let me and Ardenbroke — I wonder he didn't recognise you the other evening — into two or three very profitable speculations."

The invalid chuckled cynically at these words, looking at the label of his medicine bottle, which he turned slowly about in his fingers.

"Ye'll be meaning that Hotel thing, and that silver mine; well, that's a gude when years bygane," said he, turning on a sudden a little angrily on the young gentleman, and fixing his shrewd and grim eyes from under their white penthouse upon the young man, while he still held the phial up between his finger and thumb.

Mr. Gillespie had a temper which he was now rich enough, on occasion, to indulge.

"Why, if ye play at bowls, you'll meet with rubbers," interposed the little man hastily. "My governor was in that himself and got out of it bad enough, and it's more than ten ago."

"Ten years or twa, it don't matter, we've heard o'er much o' that; folk must creep before they gang; every man must win his ain experience, sir; wise men could not pick up money if there were no fules to throw it about. I always said, a mon must use his brains, and what's their proper object but the fules that Providence throws in his way? Dang me, sir, life's a game like ony ither; if I leave a blot, and the dice serve, ye'll hit it, and what for no? And if ye do the same — I'm talking too much; this 'ill not serve my hand."

"No, nor your head. Can't you let a thing pass?" urged Mr. Levi.

"It's all right enough," said Mr. Gillespie, looking at his large gold watch which lay upon the table. "It's time I should have them drops; I'll ask you for them, Mr. L.; will ye measure two o' they spoonfuls into that glass? — and — we'll let byganes be byganes, sir, and I drink to ye," he added, facetiously, with a nod to Mr. Dacre.

"And now that you are at leisure, Mr. Gillespie, we'll exchange papers, please, and I shall go."

The old gentleman signed to Levi, who seemed familiar with the arrangements of his room, to bring him his desk.

"Tis not one man in a thousand I'd do it for," muttered Gillespie, as he handed it to Mr. Dacre, who placed it beside a counterpart which he took from his coat pocket. The writing was very short; the comparison hardly lasted two minutes, and he signed one which he handed to Mr. Gillespie, and placed in his pocket the other bearing that gentleman's signature, and some other signatures beside.

"Good night, sir," said Mr. Dacre, walking out of the room, followed by Mr. Levi.

When they reached the landing Mr. Dacre paused. The hall-door was half open, and they could see the companion they had left outside, walking to and fro beside the cab, smoking.

"I've a mind to drive out to Brompton. We don't want that great, hulking fellow any more; we'll send him off — eh?"

He glanced at his watch.

"Hallo! later than I thought — no, I shan't mind," and Dacre jumped into the cab.

## CHAPTER IV.

### A CONFERENCE.

WHILE Dacre was resolving, for reasons of his own, against visiting Guildford House for some time longer, Charles Mannering was making his way there in a cab.

It was ten o'clock when he ran up the stairs to the drawingroom. The ladies had already gone to their rooms, and he found the servant on the point of putting out the candles.

Will you tell Miss Gray's maid, please, that I have come, and that I should be glad to know whether Miss Gray would prefer seeing me now, or would rather wait to hear my news till I come in the morning?"

Before another minute had passed Miss Gray was in the drawingroom, and, after a hasty greeting, he related his interview with Dacre. The incident which involved an attack upon his life, however, he postponed telling. Perhaps he thought it might alarm her; perhaps he did not care, without sifting evidence a little more, unduly to elevate her hero.

Your friend, Mr. Dacre, puzzles me," said Charles. "I don't exactly know what to make of him."

"I don't understand your difficulty," answered she.

"I don't quite understand it myself," he replied. "The fact is, it has been culminating. All along there has seemed to me something more enigmatical about him than is accountable by a mere temporary secrecy."

"Yes, of course there is, because we don't know the causes and conditions of his concealment."

"It is something more — it is something quite indefinable in his manner, but which at times strikes one with a chill of suspicion. I felt it the very first time I saw him, as I looked at him through my glass while he talked with Ardenbroke, and afterwards to that old gray-headed man at the opera, and I felt it again tonight."

His eyes met Laura's as he said this pale, with an odd smile, her eyes were fixed upon him with a painful inquiry; had she experienced the same repulsion mingling with as mysterious a fascination?

"One always does connect the idea of insecurity with secrecy," she said, averting her eyes. "But is not that very unjust — obviously unfair? It must be so, if secrecy can ever be justifiable."

"Yes, so it would appear; yet there seem to be certain ambiguities with which nature or providence, call the power how we may, has associated in our imaginations the idea of what is deadly and perfidious."

"Yes, in our imaginations; but we must not be governed altogether by that faculty," said the young lady.

"I fancied it your favourite faculty!"

"How so?"

"Why, you profess yourself a creature, not of reason, but of instinct, and the imagination is the seat of instinct."

You are growing too metaphysical for me — a great deal. Justice is one of our instincts, and justice says very plainly that it would be wrong to condemn any one simply because he chose to be private and unobserved."

Charles Mannering laughed, but there was some little tinge of reproach in the tone in which he said —

"I wonder, Challys, whether, under any circumstances, you would take the trouble to plead my cause as well?"

"Come, Charley, I won't have this. You have been very sensible up to this; why should you on a sudden break down so lamentably, and insinuate that I, the most honest friend in the world, am not reliable? If you say another word of the kind, I have done with you. But have you no better reason for your misgivings about Mr. Dacre? It seems almost a perfidy to ask it, but you and I have known one another so long, and so well."

"He laughed again a little sadly, and said he —

It appears odd to me that he should give as his address a place where he does not live; that he should defer his visit to me until the hour at which he usually calls here, although his excuse for coming here so late is, that his business keeps him in the country to that hour; and he told you, you say, that he had abandoned that business for the present, in order to devote himself to the prosecution of this affair. Then, when I came to the door of my chambers, to let him out, there was a companion — a very odd-looking person — waiting on the lobby for him, and I detected a sort of signalling from Dacre, I fancied, to warn that person that he was overheard, and in fact it struck me so oddly that I followed him downstairs, and I found that in the next court they were joined by a third person, and they walked on abreast so rapidly that I could not overtake them, but as I reached the street Dacre from a cab window nodded and smiled to me, and they drove away together."

"I can see nothing in all that at all inconsistent with his representations."

"There is no such conflict of course as would hang him — no actual conflict; but I could not doubt that the persons who joined him were not gentlemen, and there is, I think, a kind of shock in discovering that sort of association; and all I know is, that the whole thing has left on my mind a most uncomfortable uncertainty."

It is not pleasant, in such an anxiety as I am, to have one's uncertainties aggravated, and I do think wantonly," said Miss Laura Gray, very unreasonably. "And Mr. Dacre is just the kind of person — we can't be blind to the fact that he is unusually elegant and graceful — to make others who happen to be placed beside him look very much more the reverse than they really are; and I don't think there is anything worth a thought in all this; and it does not even make me feel the least uncomfortable, which perhaps is disappointing."

Miss Challys Gray was very near kindling into one of her indignations.

Charles smiled and shook his head a little looking almost sad on her pretty face.

"You smile; you're very odd, certainly," mused Miss Gray, passionately; "just because you see me very much in earnest, I wonder what pleasure you can find in trying to make me believe you, think me a fool?"

"No, I've told you a thousand times, I think you very clever, on the contrary; if you repeat the accusation I'll say you do so only to make me repeat my poor testimony. If I smile, Challys, it is partly at your character, which also I admire, and partly at my

own folly, which I deplore, but cannot cure; and so, having detained you too long, I'll say good night."

"You'll come again in the morning — wont you?"

"Yes, certainly; I'm always quite at your command; it is one of my happiest hours that is spent in executing your commissions — so never spare me."

"A thousand thanks, Charlie, you're so goodnatured. Then I will say goodnight now; and you'll not forget us in the morning?"

So they parted. She heard him get into his cab, and drive away. She raised the window and looked out, and round and down the once more silent avenue.

She sighed as she drew back her pretty head.

"Poor Charlie! he's sometimes so high-flown; he talks of his folly, and thinks himself so wise, and he's such a good creature."

She looked up at the stars and smiled and looked somehow oddly pleased, and then, with a little sigh, she turned away and ran up the stairs.



## CHAPTER V.

### A DRAWINGROOM CONTROVERSY.

"I DON'T think there is anything worth a thought in all this, and it does not even make me the least uncomfortable," Miss Challys Gray had said; but she had spoken in her haste; it did make her uncomfortable, and *that* it was, perhaps, which had vexed her.

In the morning, however, came a pleasant note from Mr. Dacre. It was expressed in these terms: —

"MY DEAR MISS GRAY, — I have every hope that I shall have very important news to tell you when I have next the pleasure of seeing you. I don't yet comprehend the plot, but I can already identify, I think, at least some of the plotters. Such a gang of wretches! I have been compelled to make some extremely odd acquaintances, and to revive a not very desirable old one, in the course of my inquisition. From one I have just extracted a note, which I shall ultimately use as an instrument to compel a complete confession, and thus bring the conspiracy to its knees. I saw your friend Mr. Mannering, yesterday evening, at his chambers, but had nothing very particular to tell, except my ugly little adventure at Islington, which, perhaps, he related to you. After I had obtained my first success yesterday evening, with the paper in my pocket by which I hope to carry my point, I had just made up my mind — but changed it on good grounds — to run out to Guildford House, and, late as it was, to implore a few minutes; but it was too late, and there were other reasons, as I have said, for delay.

"Believe me, my dear Miss Gray,

Ever yours very truly,

"ALFRED DACRE."

When Charles came that day as he had promised, she did not care to show him this note. She simply told him that she had received a line which explained everything, and related how.

"But," she said "he mentions an adventure which happened to him at Islington. What was it?"

Charles Mannering was a little put out; but he rallied, and told the story.

"Good heavens!" she exclaimed with a gasp when he had done. "And how did you come not to tell me all that before?"

"I can't exactly say; but two reasons, I am sure contributed. In the first place, I suspect there is exaggeration or mistake; and, in the next, I see no possible good in frightening you by such a story, whether true or false. Of course, it tends to make Mr. Dacre, more interesting, and that is motive enough for him; but I am certain that any one who cares for you will say I acted kindly, as I think Mr. Dacre would have done, in allowing that story to continue untold for a little longer.

"I don't agree with you," she said; "I ought to have heard it. There is no room for mistake about such a thing, nor for exaggeration, that I can see; either it happened or it didn't; of course, it is easy for any one to tell wilful untruths; and I don't suspect him of that, any more than you do, I know; but you don't like him."

"I don't like people I know nothing about — that's very true," acquiesced Charles.

"You know quite well what I mean: I mean, you hate him," she said.

"No," he laughed. "No, I assure you, I don't hate him; but I think he's made too much of. I think he has been allowed to thrust or to insinuate himself into a position to which, I think, he has no earthly claim."

Miss Laura Gray smiled a little disdainfully, and turned away to her flowers in the window.

Charles, of course, saw that smile, understood its meaning perfectly, and winced under it.

"I don't think any unworthy motive has helped me to my opinion of Mr. Dacre. I don't hate him, and I don't like him. I think, I may say, I *dislike* him."

Hereupon Miss Gray raised her pretty eyebrows a little, turning towards him with a smile, and made him the faintest little courtesy in the world, and then smiled diligently at her flowers; and he could only see her long eyelash as she looked down at them, rearranging them with her delicate fingers in the tall, old china vases in which we see them painted in dark Dutch pictures.

"Yes, I think I may say, I dislike him," continued Charles, defiantly, but coolly. "I am certain he is conceited; his countenance inspires no confidence. I fancy him giddy, selfish, and violent — you like instinct, and I am giving it to you — I fancy him all that; and I think him quite capable of telling fibs, or selling a friend a bad horse at a good price, or anything else of the kind."

"But is not that merely supposing him a man?" suggested Miss Gray.

Without noticing, however, this query, Charles Mannering went on with his confession.

"I don't say it's charitable; but there are a great many opinions that are neither charitable nor *uncharitable* — that are, in fact, simply just. Ardenbroke knows him, I dare say, and even likes him in a kind of way, as he must do a great many agreeable fellows of the same kind; but that means, as a clever girl like you must suppose, and as every man knows, very little indeed. I say there is something in him that inspires distrust. I don't like him; on the contrary, I dislike him, and I am quite determined I'll make out everything about him."

"That will task your ingenuity, wont it?" she said gently. "I am rather curious myself; but I don't expect to hear till he chooses."

"Which may be never," said Charles. "I shan't wait."

"I don't object," said Miss Gray; "only let us be quite distinct on this point. Remember, I have nothing whatever to do with it. I am quite satisfied; in fact, I should think myself extremely impertinent, to say nothing worse, if I were to engage in any such inquiry respecting a person who has been so kind, and who is, after all, a mere acquaintance, and whom I know to be a friend of Ardenbroke's."

"I'm glad you have no objection."

"I can have no objection to your doing anything you please, on your own account, provided it does not affect me," said Miss Gray.

“He says he has a taste for being a detective. I don’t say I have quite that, but, I dare say, when occasion requires, I can be just as sharp as he. My inquiries shall be made in a direct and fearless way. I shan’t act like a detective — that is not usual — but I’ll learn something about him, and if no one knows such a person I shall make my own inferences.”

“Take care, Charlie, for he has been living abroad, and people are duellists there still.”

“You laugh at me as if you thought I wasn’t in earnest. I promise you I’ll bring you news of him.”

“Very good — only again remember I did not send you. In fact, I don’t see any reasonable ground for pursuing him with inquiries, and there are many obvious reasons against doing so; and I still think it was very odd your not telling me a word of that really frightful adventure at Islington.”

“I am sorry my reasons didn’t satisfy you — a cracker or a sixpenny cannon very likely — but we can’t, in the present state of evidence, agree on a single point about this interesting person. When a little more light comes perhaps we shall.”

“Perhaps so,” said Miss Gray.

He fancied, I think, that he had alarmed her by threatening inquiry, but she was really amused, for I think she suspected a motive.

## CHAPTER VI.

### THE SYNAGOGUE.

MR. DACRE did not come that night, nor his "hand," as Charles Mannering learned on making polite inquiry about the promised parcel, nor any word or sign to show people at Guildford House that he was living. No note reached Charles Mannering's chambers — no call was made there by the object of his suspicions.

But on the day following an odd little note reached Challys Gray from her persistent correspondent, Mr. Dacre. It said: —

"MY DEAR MISS GRAY, — Don't be alarmed, neither suppose that you shall have any trouble whatever in consequence, but you must aid me in identifying a malefactor! an opportunity occurs tomorrow (Friday). You, who enjoy good music, have you never heard the Jewish service performed at the synagogue in Mortlake-street, in the City? On that evening, pray attend at a quarter-past eight o'clock. I enclose a note, which will secure a good place for you and Mrs. Wardell. You will be placed in the gallery near the stair at the great entrance. At the opposite end of the building will be, in a railed enclosure, in what I shall call the aisle, five singers, who will walk after an officer of the synagogue to the eastern end during the course of the service, and back again. Of these, two will be tenors. You will have an opportunity of observing their faces. Do so, and kindly tell me if anything very particular strikes you in either. Unless something quite unforeseen should happen I shall be there myself, and hope for a word at your carriage window before you leave. Pray do not fail. Your going there will decide a point which at present perplexes me. Everything waits upon it. Pray do not refuse. The worst that can befall you is to hear some fine music without effecting anything more important. On the other hand, you may throw a flood of light upon the darkness that baffles me.

"Confiding in your good sense and spirit, I am sure you will make the effort. I have the honour of knowing those attributes too well to doubt it. If I write too boldly pray attribute my rashness to my zeal, and forgive me. Believe me, my dear Miss Gray, ever yours most truly,

"ALFRED DACRE.

"P.S. — I forgot to say the gallery is exclusively for ladies."

Here, then, was an adventure. Her drive she had daily. Shopping and all that. Intolerably dull the routine had become. But this excursion was something quite new. To penetrate the City; to sit in a Jewish synagogue and hear their worship and their chanting; and all with a purpose so strange, and even interesting, was quite charming; so thought Miss Gray, and perhaps the thought of that word at the carriage window, and the great eyes of her *preux chevalier* looking in, contributed something to the interest of the anticipation. She ran into the drawingroom where Mrs. Wardell sat, and, said she —

"Julia, I am going, to introduce you to a, new religion."

"What on earth does the mad-cap mean?" exclaimed the old lady, laying down her crochet, and raising her spectacles.

"Yes, you and I shall be Jewesses, and I've made up my mind we shall be received in the synagogue tomorrow."

There was a silence, during which Julia Wardell gazed in her grave, handsome face.

"Oh! come, come, my dear! religion's no subject for joking."

She remembered some flighty ideas which Laura had picked up out of books, and for which she had been taken to task by the curate at Gray Forest. She had been present at one of their controversial encounters in the drawingroom, and had been lost in the clouds, and was edified by Laura's audacity and learning, and thought her capable of anything.

"No, Julia," she said, laughing, "you shall have liberty of conscience. What I really intend is to take you with me tomorrow to a Jewish synagogue in the City, where we shall hear some good music."

"Well, you need not frighten one by talking as if you were out of your wits. I shouldn't object — in fact, I should like it very well," said Julia Wardell.

"You mustn't tell any one — it's a secret expedition, mind," Challys Gray enjoined.

Mrs. Wardell agreed, appending the reflection, "but who *is* there to tell?"

"There's Charles Mannering, and I'm sure he'd find out some excellent reason why we should not go."

"Not if he came with us himself."

"Well, I don't want that either — we're not obliged to tell Charles Mannering everything we do, and I shouldn't like to take him with us."

"Very good, dear; there's no very particular reason why we should, and I suppose we mustn't talk — any more than we do in church — so I don't see any good in taking him with us."

"And don't ask him to tea," said Laura.

"Why not to tea?" inquired she.

"Because we are to go in the evening. Don't be alarmed, we shall have a gallery to ourselves, and the carriage shall wait close to the door — and I think it is a charming adventure."

So on Friday morning she sent a note to Charles to say —

"We are going out this evening, so don't come" — and having written thus far, she fancied she had meant him to think they were going out to tea — so she resolutely added, "It is not to tea, and. I'm not going to tell you more than that we are going to a place of worship, and I hope that way of spending an evening is approved of by your gravity."

Charles did not appear. In due time the carriage was at the door; the ladies got in, and away they drove.

They arrived at their destination a little late. They should have been there before sunset. It was now twilight, and the street lamps lighted.

When the carriage drew up, Laura looked from the window and saw a large building resembling, she thought with some disappointment, a meeting-house. She saw a large door in the centre, and two smaller doors, one at each side. But no one appeared at the steps to whom they could put a question.

The footman stood at the carriage door for his orders. In her perplexity she saw a female beckon to her from one of the side doors — and was determined.

“Come, Julia — come, dear;” and she got out, followed by Mrs. Wardell, and they found themselves in a small chamber, from which a staircase ascended.

“How did you know, dear, that we wished to come up to the gallery?” asked Laura of the handsome little Jewish girl with raven hair and great dark eyes, and the rich transparent tints of her race.

“The liveries, please, miss, and — and I was told the colour of your eyes, and that you were very handsome, please.”

Laura smiled, and was disposed to like the little girl, and to admire the place. But there was not, as yet, at least, much to admire. It was very much such a vestibule and staircase, lighted by a hanging lamp, as conduct to the gallery of a commonplace church, except that they did not communicate by any side door with the great central passage leading on to the floor of the building.

She was, however, already interested, for, faint and muffled, she heard the solemn swell of voices chanting. She could distinguish at times the soaring notes of a falsetto mingling with tenors and basses; and as she softly ascended, those strange and beautiful harmonies, exceeding, she thought, any she had ever heard in cathedral music, grew grander and more thrilling, until, on reaching the back of the gallery, the music was perfectly distinct. But here she was disappointed for although she found herself in an assembly of Jewish women (as was clear enough from the peculiarities of outline and complexion), a close lattice-work covered the front of the gallery, and she feared would effectually interrupt her view of the interior of the building.

The little girl silently indicated two vacant seats in front, to which accordingly they made their way. Here it was easy to see through the lattice, now close to their eyes, all that was passing below.

## CHAPTER VII.

### A RECOGNITION.

LOOKING beneath and before her she saw a large chamber, the general effect of which resembled that of a church, with, however, few considerable distinctions.

There was at each side a row of tall windows, which, however, the deepening twilight failed to penetrate, and the lamplight from large hanging candelabra filled the building. Some way up the centre passage, was a railed enclosure containing a table, on a sort of dais, ascended by several steps. At each side of this table stood a man; one the reader, the other an officer of the synagogue, and behind them at a desk were six others, who were, at the moment, chanting the service, led by the reader. Beyond this, at the far extremity, was something resembling a wardrobe, covered before with a red velvet curtain embroidered with gold, and with Hebrew letters embroidered on the valance at its top; and in bas relief an angel, as large as a living human figure, was carved at each side of it. Over this hung a solitary lamp, and at its right extremity stood a figure, very singular. He was dressed in a white satin cassock, that nearly reached the ground; his shoes were fastened with large silver buckles, and on his head a tall, white conical hat, with a dark roll of fur instead of a brim, surrounding his head. The curtained piece of furniture was the ark, and the strangely-costumed man was the Rabbi.

The officiating people, as well as the congregation, all males, stood facing the East, their backs toward the gallery, and wearing their hats, and each with a white woollen drapery, with a broad stripe of blue, hanging about his shoulders.

The scene was so odd, almost grotesque, for these white draperies were worn shawl fashion, and had long slender white tassels from their corners — and the voices were so splendid, the entire service proceeding in the Hebrew language, and the Oriental seclusion of the lattice so new and strange, that Laura was too much interested in the novelty of the spectacle and situation for a minute or two, to recollect the particular object of her visit. Soon, however, it recurred. She fixed her attention on the singers. There were two tenors, one a smaller man than the other. But standing as they all did with their backs to the gallery, she almost despaired of any accident's affording her a glimpse of their faces.

Such a chance, however, did at last occur. The chanting subsided. There was a silence, and the reader called in a few words in a low tone to a person, one of the officers of the synagogue, who proceeded to a distant seat, from which arose a hatted man with his copious white shawl, who proceeded to the ark, drew the curtain, opened a double door, and produced two rolls, which he drew reverently forth from their embroidered velvet cases.

These were the manuscript copies of the law written on vellum. The reading of the law was to begin, and now, too, began the opportunity for which Laura Gray had been waiting.

From one of the openings in the side of the railed enclosure the reader proceeded, followed by the six singers, his assistants, who proceeded singly in slow procession behind him up the building, and as they filed round the corner of the railing she had a glimpse of each in the series of those dark Jewish faces — and one, that of the smaller tenor, who was walking like the rest with downcast eyes startled her. She had but a momentary and very imperfect view of the blackhaired pallid face which looked to her like the malignant countenance which she had seen at the window and in the hall of Guildford House! She drew back instinctively — she felt uncertain but frightened. Very much frightened for a few seconds, and then very angry with Mr. Dacre for exposing her to that kind of shock without a warning. Then she began to grow very restless and uncomfortable, and her first impulse was to make her escape quietly and quickly from the place.

But was she quite certain — was there no mistake? when she looked again these figures stood, like the rest, with their backs turned toward her. The reader was standing a little to the left of the Rabbi, and the singers in a semicircle behind him. The chanting proceeded, and she remained in uncertainty.

Henceforward the vocal music, rich in harmony, finer still in the quality of the voices that mingled in it, had ceased to enchant her. Like sweet and solemn music heard through a terrible dream, it confused her sensations, but her spirit no longer took part in it. She could think of nothing but the chance of again seeing, and with more certain observation, that odious, face which she was so nearly certain she recognised.

Now, again, the chanting was suspended. The reader and his choir returned in the same order to their former places, and as they marched slowly down this face turned fully to the gallery, she did see the face that had looked in at the study window and peered into the hall, and that pale, black-browed man, with the large sullen mouth, and the great lurid eyes, chanting the time-honoured Jewish liturgy, was actually one — perhaps the chief — of those miscreant conspirators who were persecuting her with so satanic a persistency, and had actually attempted to murder Alfred Dacre.

A sense of danger and of horror overpowered her — she felt faint, and whispered in Mrs. Wardell's ear —

"Let us come away, dear."

"But may we?" answered the chaperon.

"I'll try — I won't stay," whispered Laura, and rose quickly. No interruption was offered. Their withdrawal seemed hardly observed. How glad she was of that lattice screen that covered the front of the gallery, for the sullen malignant eye of the little tenor had for a moment swept the place from which she was looking down and held her there.

On reaching the street door Alfred Dacre stepped swiftly to her side. He looked in her face and saw how pale she was as he offered her his arm. She was seated in the carriage, she scarcely knew how, and he leaning on the window looking in.

"You are fatigued?" he whispered, taking her hand with an anxious look.

"Nothing," she said, not removing it.

"It was so good of you to come."

"I suspected it was all about my own business, and so it was," she said, looking for a moment darkly into his eyes with a very little nod.

"I understand. You recognised some one?"

"Yes."

"Then my course is clear."

"You are not to take any step without first consulting me," said Challys Gray, with a sudden access of her imperious manner, "Nothing — I'll never speak again to you if you do, Mr. Dacre. Nothing shall be done without my permission."

He smiled, and said —

"May I call tomorrow at Guildford House?"

Yes, certainly. Who is Mrs. Wardell talking to?" she said, glancing at the other window. "Is that Charles Mannerling?" she said addressing the speaker at the other side.

"Yes, here I am," said Charles, with a laugh; "you did not expect me. I ran down to Brompton on the chance of your having changed your mind and stayed at home, to beg a cup of tea, and I learned from the servant that you had come to this place, and I was impertinent enough to follow."

Though Charles laughed, she fancied he looked vexed, and was speaking in a tone that was not really so gay as he assumed to be. And though, perhaps, she would not have confessed this to any one, I think it made her uncomfortable.

"Don't go for a moment," she whispered to him; and, resuming her little talk with Mr. Dacre, she said— "I am so nervous while I stay here. I am longing to leave this place. I was a little vexed with you, for a moment, when I saw that face; but I dare say it was necessary, at least important, that I should."

"The important and the ridiculous, trick and reality, deceit and enthusiasm, as you, may one day learn, Miss Gray, are strangely mixed up at times. It shall be my office to discriminate. I admire your energy. I wish I could tell you all I owe you. You have showed me the game, and I will run it down."

"But you remember, you are not to do anything without my consent," she said.

"Don't be the least uneasy; there shall be no *fracas*, do you but be half as wise as I believe you."

"Well, I'll try. And, now, I really am growing uncomfortable; those dreadful people will be coming out; and I think the horses are growing impatient; so I'll say good night," and she gave him her hand and continued— "Julia, dear, Mr. Dacre is going, you must bid him good night." And thus, transferring him to Mrs. Wardell, she herself turned to Charles, and said— "You must come back to tea with us; you'll come in here and drive home with us."

"Do you really wish it?" said he. "Wish it? Of course I wish it, or I shouldn't tell you to do it," said the young lady.

"Well, I've got a cab here. I can't take a seat with you, I'm very sorry to say, having a call to make; but it is only a minute or two at my solicitor's chambers, and I shall be at Guildford House in less than ten minutes after you get there; and I wont say good bye."

"What a very charming person he is exclaimed Julia Wardell, turning towards the speaker.

"Who?" asked Laura.

"Oh! Mr. Dacre, of course," said Charles. "I don't know of anyone else, at present, answering to the description."

"Well, he's gone and we must go also, so I shall expect you, remember," and away they drove toward home.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### THE FLEET.

AS they drove away Charles saw Mr. Dacre step into a cab, in which he saw, he fancied, some other persons seated. It drove away just as he got into his hansom. He was in no particular good humour with Mr. Dacre; and, at sight of his companions, his suspicions and his curiosity revived.

"Drive after that cab and be sure you keep it in sight," said he; himself watching it with a shrewd and steady gaze as they pursued.

From time to time as they clattered along the pavement, Mannering told the driver to pull in a little, so as to regulate the distance between them; and, with this caution, he followed through several streets, and turning into one, deserted and old-fashioned, Dacre's cab drew up at the steps of a dingy hall-door. Dacre and one of his companions got out, and, after a very few words his friend ran up the steps, and Dacre jumping into the cab, it drove away at a rapid pace. Charles Mannering had his misgivings about Dacre. What or who was he? That was an odd-looking street — a curious habitation for the intimate of a very fine man as, he fancied, Dacre assumed to be.

Some qualms visited him as he pursued the chase. Was this sort of thing within the limits which circumscribe a gentleman's morality?

"Yes;" he insisted

bullying himself— "it is not merely allowable, but my duty. I will find out who this Mr. Dacre is. I'll learn, at all events, what are his haunts, and who his friends. It is worse than ridiculous, the confidence with which Challys treats him; that the poor little thing should be made such a fool of; and certainly, I'll not spare myself, nor spare him either, and — where are we getting to now?"

By this time they were approaching a famous place. That grand *chemin de fer*, the road to ruin, had then, as we know, like other great highways, that daily and nightly pour into a common centre their inexhaustible streams of life — its handsome and convenient terminus, I mean the Fleet Prison; and, at the entrance of this Mr. Dacre's cab drew up, and he and his remaining companion jumped down to the flags — beside a lamp-post, which then stood close to the door.

With Dacre there entered at this door his companion, a fat, round-shouldered Jew, some sixty years of age, with the characteristic heavy nose; a great moist smiling mouth, and eyes half closed; his hands in his pockets, and his wrinkled and somewhat, dusty black velvet waistcoat crossed and lapped with several gold chains.

"How ish Mr. Blunt this hevening?" he inquired politely of Mr. Blunt the officer at the hatch, a low door, well barred and bolted, which communicated with the interior passage, a view of which it permitted breast high.

"Well, thank you, sir. Can I do anything for you, Mr. Goldshed?" said this gentleman, touching his hat as he lowered his newspaper.

"We want to pay a vishit, me and my friend, to Mr. de Beaumirail, if he'sh at home," drawled the Jew, facetiously.

"Well," said Mr. Blunt unbending, in the same pleasant vein, and opening the enchanted gate to let these privileged spirits pass in; "it's only to knock at his hall-door, sir, and ask the footman." In the passage lounging about the hatch were several nondescript persons, who might be bailiffs or wardens, a reserve force in case of any one's being disposed to be troublesome.

"Any more detainers against Foljambe?" drawled the Jew in Mr. Blunt's ear, as he passed.

"Just a little thing o' fifteen pun, sir."

"Nothing else, you're sure?" said Mr. Goldshed, stopping short.

"Not a penny, sir."

Mr. Goldshed whistled some bars of a quiet tune, which was interrupted by a little hiccough, as he shook off his momentary meditation, and swayed and swaggered after his companion. Charles Mannering jumped down to the flagway, hesitated, and got in again, and then made up his mind, got out once more, told the man to wait where he was, and walked on to the door which Dacre had entered only a minute before.

Our friend, Charles Mannering, felt as a proud man does who has detected himself doing a shabby thing. His pride upbraided him, and he was inwardly ashamed. He could not acknowledge it though, and he was determined to brazen it out.

The fact is, he was jealous of this handsome Alfred Dacre, and jealousy is a madness, subject, as we know, to capricious and violent paroxysms. He had seen Dacre talking at the window of the carriage to Challys Gray, and conclusions had instantly possessed his mind. Dacre had, of course, arranged this visit to the synagogue, had accompanied them, and had in fact as much of their society as he pleased; while he had been not only uninvited to be of the expedition, but written to and forbidden to go to Guildford House; but he would have been in the way.

And who was this Mr. Dacre whom Challys Gray had taken up in so unaccountable a way, and appointed to be her standing counsel, and her knight errant, her prime minister, and even her master of the revels?

He, Charles Mannering, would find out all about him. He had no idea of mere masks and disguises, *mimæ*, *balatrones*, winning their way by sheer impudence and insinuation, with their disguises still on, into such houses as Challys Gray's. He was huffed and wounded, and in no mood to mince matters with Mr. Dacre. The sooner, in his present temper, he thought, they went to the heart of the question, and understood one another, the better. And he was quite sure if Ardenbroke were here, he would thoroughly approve the resolution he had taken.

He stepped in, expecting to see Dacre, but he had gone in as we have seen, and Charles walked up to Mr. Blunt, and he said — not knowing well what question to put —

"The gentleman who came in here this minute, can you tell me where he is?"

"Mr. Goldshed?"

No, Mr. Dacre; two gentlemen came in here together?"

"Oh! yes, I know *him* — gone in to see Mr. de Beaumirail — well, sir?"

Well, what was to be his next step? He had cooled by this time.

"Do you want him, sir?"

"Well, as he's gone in to see a friend, you say, it will answer me another time. I'll — yes — I shall see him elsewhere, tomorrow, or — that will do. Will you allow me to light my cigar?"

And with this disjointed address, and his cigar glowing, he turned his back upon Mr. Blunt, and full of conjecture, as to what Mr. Dacre could possibly want of De Beaumirail, whom he professed to detest, he returned to his cab.

"Not too late to follow them to Brompton," he thought, as he looked at his watch under the lamp.

After all this devious excursion had been accomplished at such a pace that less time than one would have supposed had been wasted upon it. So away he went, having bribed the cabman with a handsome promise, through the still bustling town to the then comparatively rural and sequestered suburb of Old Brompton.



## CHAPTER IX.

### A WORD IN HASTE.

"OH, Charlie, you're a good creature, after all," said Challys Gray. "I'm so glad you have come."

So gay and kindly was her voice, that half his jealousy and all his gloom vanished as he spoke.

"Glad — really glad — well! I'm rewarded. Did you like the singing — was it worth so long a drive, and so unprotected a — what shall I call it?"

"A frolic," said Challys Gray — "quite worth it; and I advise you to look in and listen, and Julia Wardell will lend you her white Cashmere shawl, and you'll not have the trouble even of taking off your hat. But what do you mean by unprotected? I'll tell you — you mean a question. You men are always accusing us poor women of practising small duplicities and indirections, and, alas, what an example do you set us? For instance, by introducing that one little word, you contrive to ask me, without seeming to do so — did you and Julia Wardell go by yourselves?"

He laughed.

"It is so well reasoned, I can't find it in my heart to deny it."

"Well, I'll meet that confession by telling you as frankly, we did go by ourselves, and witnessed the whole thing without a protector — not among the gentlemen in shawls, but among the ladies in great coats."

He fancied that she said all this to acquit herself of having been accompanied by Mr. Dacre. There was something unspeakably gratifying in this. Charles's spirit effervesced.

"Yes, indeed," said Mrs. Wardell, lowering her book of fashions — in which she had been studying a lady in gigot sleeves, smiling over her left shoulder, with pink gloves on, and a lilac pelisse — "all we ladies were shut up together in the gallery, with a little grille before us, so that no one could see us from the lower part of the chamber, or whatever it is, and very comfortably we saw and heard it all. I was rather amused — I mean, of course, it's wrong to say exactly that of a place of — of — is it exactly worship — now that the Jews, you know, are under a curse?"

"We did not act on that though. We sat there as discreetly as the most orthodox Jewess; and very delightful, really, the singing was."

"I saw Dacre there," said Charles, who by a glance had ascertained that Mrs. Wardell was deep in her fashions again.

"Yes," said Laura, a little dryly.

"Had he anything to tell worth hearing?"

"No; nothing yet but good hopes."

"In what direction do his hopes point?" said Charles.

"He expects a discovery very soon."

"I think I have made a little discovery myself in the meantime," said Charles.

"About whom?" she asked, raising her eyes suddenly.

"About Mr. Dacre," he said, with a faint smile, returning her gaze as steadily.

"Oh," said Laura, also with a smile, growing a little pale, and then suddenly blushing and looking away.

She looked back again at him a little fiercely, quite straight. He was still smiling, but his face was sad and pale.

"Now, Charlie, here we are, a pair of fools," she said, with a gay laugh. "You look at me as if you suspected me of high treason, or worse, if worse can be; and I, like an idiot as I am, blush, as usual, without a reason. Was ever so provoking a trick? I always do it. It is quite enough if I particularly wish not to blush. I am always sure to blush at the wrong moment. One day when we were all together in the drawingroom at Gray Forest, and dear papa reading his newspaper by the window, in came old Medlicot, the housekeeper, in consternation, to report that one of three West Indian fruits — they were like ripe figs — I remember them very well, and a great curiosity, to have been pronounced upon that day after dinner by the collective wisdom — one of them was missing. Dear papa laid down his paper; you were talking to my poor sister, and you were silent. She looked up from her drawing at old Medlicot; and I, what did I do? — I blushed, neck, forehead, all scarlet. I held up my head as long as I could; but I felt the brand of guilt glowing on my cheeks. My eyes dropped to the carpet, and, in an agony of conscious innocence, I burst into tears. My father told old Medlicot it did not matter. I know he thought I had taken it, and was sparing my feelings. I think you all thought I had eaten it — and there never was a time when I could have done so mean a thing — or hid it, if I had, but I didn't; and dear Maud understood me when I told her, and laughed and kissed me, and pitied me ever so much. Poor Maud, she understood me, and always judged me charitably, through all my furies and follies, and made much of the little good that was in me, and made the best of all the bad."

As she spoke, Challys Gray got up and went to the window, which was open, and looked out.

A very different scene it was from the lordly timber, the broad river, and high wooded banks which one saw from the great window of Gray Forest. Very different, too, from the still, sultry sea, under the brilliant moon of Naples, with which, for two winters, her eye had grown familiar. Still there was something she liked — something even of poetry, in the dim night view of the tufted trees, and homely and irregular buildings.

"I'll bid you goodnight, I believe," said Julia Wardell, waking gently, and putting her worsteds into her work-basket. "Would you mind touching the bell, Charles? Thanks;" and, giving her dog in charge of the servant, he conveyed the brute upstairs, where, at Mrs. Wardell's door, her maid received the dog and his mistress.

A *tête-à-tête* with Charlie Mannering was nothing — very like uncle and niece, brother and sister — what less romantic?

"Yes, Challys," he said, when he had closed the door after Julia Wardell, "one other person does understand you perfectly. You are a very odd person, very inconvenient, very like an angel — for I do believe nothing on earth would tempt you to tell a fib. No, from the time you were a tiny little thing, no higher than that, when I was a great clumsy fellow of seventeen, and you a

little girl of nine — always quite true. How did it happen? I wonder whether anyone else ever so walked in the light as you, Challys?"

Come, Charlie, this is quite new. I hardly know you. I expected a lecture instead — wholesome bitters, and here is a shower of bonbons."

"Well, I used, I believe, to lecture you a great deal more than I had any business to do, but I don't think I have ventured for a long time; that conceited custom has fallen into disuse, hasn't it?"

"Too long, Charlie, I like old customs, and I think it would do me good."

"Really, Challys?"

"Really, for at the worst, I should laugh at it, and laughter is about the pleasantest exercise we have. But what is your discovery, pray, about Mr. Dacre? for since I have employed him in this odd business, I should like to know."

"He told you, didn't he, that he did not know De Beaumirail, and I've discovered that he does know him, and visits him frequently in the debtors' prison."

"No, on the contrary, he said very distinctly he did know him: he never said anything else; but he did say that he didn't like him."

"Oh!" said Charles Mannerling, in a disappointed tone, "I'm very glad! Then my discovery amounts to nothing, but I suppose he'll have something to say about his interview?"

"I don't think you like him much, Charlie."

"Why?"

"Because you can't afford him a good word."

"I know next to nothing about him," answered Charles, "and the little I do know, I confess I don't like. People have a good deal to say of him that is not quite pleasant. I have heard some odd things. I'm not quite certain, that is, I don't quite rely upon them yet, but I'll make out, and you shall hear."

"I don't expect any marvels, Charlie, at least about him. By the time Ardenbroke comes back all reasons for secrecy will have disappeared, and we shall hear all about him. In the meantime it doesn't matter. I'm much more anxious to learn something about those people — shut the window, I grow nervous whenever I think of them — the people who have been writing those letters, and I did not thank you half enough for all the trouble you have been taking."

"I only wish, Challys, I could deserve your thanks in any way."

"Yes, indeed, Charlie, I am very much obliged; and suppose we talk of Gray Forest again, and old times. I think they were very happy times. I shall never be so happy again."

"Yes, you may — you will — happier than ever. It is I who have reason to despond, to despair."

"Indeed!" laughed Challys. "Why, what's the matter?"

"No, thanks, I shan't tell my story — you'd be sure to laugh at it; you've begun already."

"I told you before, I should like that extremely."

"Yes; but I shouldn't — no, I could not bear that."

Challys looked wonderingly at him for a moment. For that moment she was a little puzzled.

"Is he going," she thought, "to make me his confidante?"

"I could tell you a great deal, Challys, but it is better not — you'd think me a fool; and as you say you like laughing, you'd be sure to laugh at me."

She looked at him again. He was not more embarrassed, she thought, than a shy man might be, who was on the point of disclosing to a third person the secret of a romance.

"Surely, Charles, you are not going to have such a secret and hide it from me?"

It was Charles's turn now to glance at his companion's face — beautiful, kind; was it more than kind? Grave. What was he to make of that look? But might not there be a great deal — everything in that invitation — so appealing and quite irresistible. And if her looks betrayed no more — was she not a girl, and what spirit so cautious?

"Well, Challys, I have a story to tell."

She listened only. How beautiful she looked, as she leaned on the side of the window, listening! He could have kissed the clumsy old window-frame for her sake.

"May I tell it?"

"I'm waiting to hear, Charles."

"Well, Challys, perhaps, you have guessed it. I've tried to hide it even from myself, but it would not do — I can't. I tell you Challys, I have loved you without knowing it for years; I know it now, perhaps, too late. I adore you; if you can ever like me, darling — *ever* — don't answer now — *ever* so little; let me hope and wait, for years — any time you please, only don't decide in a moment against me. If you *could ever* — any time — *ever* so long — and if not — you'll laugh at me, Challys, for an hour, and then forget me for ever."

"Forget you!" She looked very angry; there was a brilliant flush in her cheeks. "Never, while a sense of the ridiculous remains to me. We shall never shake hands again."

There was silence for some seconds, and his ear tingled with these words.

"It is very hard I can't have a friend!" exclaimed Challys Gray vehemently. "Is there no such relation on earth as a friend and a kinsman? Why will you form your ideas of us girls from bad plays, and even farces? Nothing but lovers! You can't have meant that folly. You shall forget it, Charlie, and so will I, and I'll forgive you."

There was another silence. Charles was pushing the window as if he meant to raise it, he did not know why, but he turned to Challys, and looked at her —

"I think you might have spoken a little more kindly," said he at last, with the gentleness of utter disappointment.

"And if I had, you'd have thought I did not mean what I say, and it would have gone for nothing."

"I think you may be quite distinct, Challys, and yet kind."

“No, the unkindness is in *being* distinct, and if I were less distinct you would not have understood me. Now come, old Charlie, you usen’t to be so foolish, and you must give up all this to please me. If I did not like you very much, in the way I choose, I should not ask you. Yes, you must, now and here, make a solemn vow — you must I swear an unalterable indifference, and let us be a pair of steadfast friends, for I do like you; and I should hate to lose you, and I will give you my hand again. *There*, kind old Charlie, you have made me sorry.” And she hastily shook him by the hand, and ran away.

He was stung, he was mortified, he was grieved; his heart was very full, for he liked her still, better than ever, I think.

He continued looking at the door for some time, as if he could see her still in the air, and then he turned and leaned on the window-sash, looking out on the starlight, and the blurred and silent landscape, and he wept in silence some very bitter tears.

## CHAPTER X.

### NEW PLANS.

NOW, here was an heiress; and what was Charles Mannering, that he should aspire to her hand? There was nothing very monstrous in it, however, even in temporal matters, for Charles Mannering had some very good certainties, and much better possibilities; and, I must do him the justice to say, that he would have acted precisely as he did, if she had not fifty pounds to her dowry.

To a man such as he, with a somewhat rough exterior, yet sensitive, simple, and, in some respects, very reserved, the fear of vulgar misapprehension renders such advantages as those enjoyed by Miss Laura Challys Gray a real impediment in the way of free avowal in such romantic situations.

It was a long walk to his lodgings that night, for it was too late to find a cab, and in truth he preferred the walk to reaching home more easily and swiftly.

Until this Mr. Dacre had appeared, he had not suspected the actual state of his heart. Then the alarm of jealousy rang out. Then the danger of losing her was real. But the crisis of this evening had stolen upon him, and a great revolution befallen him unawares.

Now that he had got home to his lodgings, what was there for him to think about? Still one problem of intense interest. If he could be sure that she did not care for Alfred Dacre, the light of hope would spring up again.

After all, was it not natural, owing to very special circumstances, that Dacre should be employed, and, being employed, that he should be admitted to confer confidentially in this odd and unpleasant affair; and except in these circumstances, which might just as well exist if Dacre were an old fellow of five-and-fifty, was there anything to alarm, much less to sink him in despair? No, he must not be too much cast down.

But how would Challys receive him? On second thoughts, would she banish him? In the morning he had resumed that catechism of a hundred questions, with which in like circumstances an ingenious man can always torment himself.

A very welcome light came — a little lamp in the shape of a note, in the hand of Challys Gray, lay on his table in the morning. It said —

“You are to come to us to tea, Charlie. I shall have ever so many things to consult you about. I intend to set you down to study maps and handbooks, and make a comprehensive plan of travel for us, for I begin to grow tired of Guildford House; and for this and other reasons I think — but sage as you are, you must not vaunt your superior prescience — I think, I say, sir, I shall lead a wandering life, for a time, and peep at all places worth looking at. And now I must tell you *my* part of the plan. Your business in London is a make-belief — you don’t want it, and it doesn’t want you; you shall take your leave of that sham, and enlarge your mind, and, improve your tastes, like us, by seeing the world; every nunnery admits a lay-brother, a porter, or something, and our sisterhood (you remember I am a nun of that strict order who lead apes in the Elysian fields) can’t travel so conveniently alone; so you really must make up your mind, old Charlie, and help to take care of us. I should not half enjoy it if you were not of the party. Julia Wardell and an inflexible old maid, may not be the most interesting companions in the world; but we are cheerful, and quite free from that dismal ingredient of human nature called romance. So once for all, Charlie, come you must. Do come, or I shan’t believe that you forgive as easily as I forget, and I shall write a great deal more formally in future.”

Now here were two very consolatory sheets of notepaper, for not only did they restore him quite to his old place, but they seemed to say very clearly that Challys Gray, although she would brook no lovemaking, was yet fancy-free, and quite as resolute a spinster as ever. The sense of relief was immense. He could almost have found it in his heart, at the moment, to forgive Dacre.

So the edifice overthrown but the night before, rose up again from the rubbish of its ruin at that pleasant spell. Happy compensation, that the hopes of lovers are as easily excited as their fears!

Notwithstanding what had passed, it was therefore with a lighter heart than he had carried for some time before, that he walked up the double line of old trees to the hall-door of Guildford House.

A little sad as he drew near, but relieved at least of one terrible uncertainty — a little nervous about meeting Challys, but still happy that the way was not closed against him — he heard on a sudden a pleasant voice in the air calling —

“Welcome, welcome!”

“Thanks, Challys, a thousand thanks!” said he, looking up to the flowers and the pretty face in the drawingroom window.

“We are busy over the map of Europe, and at Murray’s Handbooks. Come up and help us.”

No one could have told by Charles’s looks or manner that his heart was beating so fast, and that he hardly knew for a minute, or two what he was saying; neither would a shrewder observer than Julia Wardell have suspected from Challys Gray’s greeting that so decisive and odd an interview had occurred so lately.

“I was thinking of Italy,” said Miss Gray, pointing with a laugh to the open atlas, and the litter of handbooks about it.

“But I have just read a few such awful words of Mr. Murray’s, about mosquitos, and the summer sun, that I shall certainly take Italy rather late; and I find myself so tired of geography, and so very ignorant of latitudes and longitudes, that I must ask you to help us at our next lesson; and you know we have time enough to decide in, for Mr. Gryston says there are things for me to sign before I go, that won’t be ready till the end of June.”

“Oh! I fancied you were going more suddenly.”

“What a pity we can’t!” Julia Wardell threw in; “and I don’t think the hot weather, if it weren’t for the flies, would matter at all. I like warm weather; I’ve known people say they could not sleep in hot weather, but I never found it disagree, with me.”

“Well, Julia dear, we’ll consult again tomorrow, and Charles shall look in and help, us — wont you? — and we’ll settle something; but I think we have puzzled over maps so long this evening, that I should like to see that great book shut up and not opened for a week again. Do, pray, shut it, Charles.”

And as she spoke she went to the window, and sat down on the stool there, looking out; and Charles joined her — the window at which only last night they had stood in that strange colloquy; and the page on which that dialogue was inscribed Challys had taken out of the record of their lives — and that history was going on, just as if that passage had never been written.

“What was that you mentioned yesterday about Mr. Dacre’s going to see that wretched man, De Beaumirail?” asked Miss Gray, after a moment’s silence.

Charles recounted the circumstance.

“I suppose he speaks ill of me to every one,” said Challys Gray, after a brief silence; “I can’t help it. I wish to Heaven some one less superstitious, or nervous, or whatever it is, had the responsibility of his fate cast upon them. I can’t get over my horror of interposing to disturb. I don’t argue it; it, is not a matter of reason, I’ve told you, but one of instinct — superstition overpowering conviction. I can’t change myself — nothing can alter me; and all the time he is describing me in such colours; and it does seem so cruel and I *can’t* help it.”

“If Mr. Dacre allows him to speak ill of you in his presence, I don’t think it matters one farthing what he thinks of anybody,” said Charles.

“I had another teasing note this morning from that poor old clergyman, Mr. Parker; he’s so good, and so foolish. So far from sympathising, he can’t even understand what I mean.”

Charles Mannering smiled, but he forbore the old dispute.

“Another reason why I don’t care to go immediately,” she said, suddenly recurring to a former part of their conversation, “is that I don’t choose those people, whoever they are, who want to frighten me, to fancy that they have driven me away. Everything, I expect, will be quiet in a very little time; the people who gave me all that annoyance will be found out, and stand disarmed and at my mercy. Then I shall go. But they shan’t bully me; and here comes tea. Shall I give you some?”

## CHAPTER XI.

### DE BEAUMIRAIL.

“WHAT kind of tea do you think this is?” asked Miss Gray of her guest.

Charles raised his cup to his lips.

While they are sipping their early tea, and talking with the volatility of youth, by this time, on quite other subjects, the reader of these pages is reminded, by the little dialogue at the close of the last chapter, that he has not visited De Beaumirail since his despairing and bitter conference with the worthy old clergyman.

How, meanwhile, did it fare with the prisoner? He was not better — worse. He lay on his bed. He had sent for his friend, perhaps his only friend, Mr. Parker.

He entered the dismal bedroom of the prodigal; very tired he seemed at the end of his breathless journey down the road to ruin. He lay in that ample dressing-gown which his few visitors knew so well. His arm was on the pillow; his forehead pillowed on his arm.

When the old clergyman stepped to the bedside, there lay Monsieur de Beaumirail, prone and motionless, his face buried in his arm, little to be seen of him but his long locks lying over that arm, those long folds of shawl drapery, and, lower down, one foot slipped, the other from which the slipper had fallen.

Have you seen tired or drunken men. He so unstrung and still that they seem to have sunk into the surface that sustains them? Here was a fellow, neither drunk nor yet tired, Heaven knows, by physical exercise, but pressed down by a load immeasurable, who lay like a dead man, sunk down together and into himself, but not by the hand of death — perhaps by a heavier sorrow.

“Mr. de Beaumirail,” murmured the clergyman, placing just his fingertips timidly on the coverlet. “Mr. de Beaumirail — pray, sir, are you worse?”

“No, sir. I don’t know — I don’t care.”

“Has your doctor been with you, sir?”

“I — upon my honour, I forget. Does it matter to anyone?”

“I thought you might not have been so well. I fancied he might not have been as well satisfied.”

“Visitation of the sick — I know — thank you — nothing of the kind,” said the prisoner gruffly.

“Would there be any use in my again calling upon Miss Gray? I ventured to write a line to her this morning.”

“I’m sorry you did. None in the world. It has come to this, that even were you to succeed with her now, it could not do me the slightest good,” said he. “The wand, one touch of which, in her hand, would have transformed the reptile you see here into a free man, has passed from her cruel fingers into a stronger grasp, and is broken; that chance is gone, and I am a very slave. I’m talking allegories.”

“Well, sir?” said the clergyman.

“And very hackneyed ones,” said De Beaumirail. “It is well to masquerade our degradations in any sort of disguise.”

“But what, pray, has happened, sir, in plain terms?” asked the old man.

“I have fallen into the hands of villains.”

“Villains! Very strong language. I hope *not*, sir,” said Mr. Parker dissuasively.

“Here I lie, sir, with the fangs of one — two — three — four wolves holding me fast.”

“Well, now, your interpretation?”

“A gang of sharpers — a gang of sharpers?” cried De Beaumirail.

“What have they done?”

“They have bought up all my debts, except hers. A bargain, sir, I suspect — don’t you? I don’t think you’d back me to pay a shilling in the pound. Eh?”

“I never make wagers, sir,” said the old clergyman.

“So much the better, unless you have the talent of making a book.”

“I don’t quite follow you, sir.”

“Well, Mr. Parker, they have bought up all the debts, except Miss Gray’s. There’s an attorney, there’s a Scotchman — —

“Some of my best friends — some of the best people on earth — are Scotchmen, sir,” expostulated the clergyman with some ardour, and a little indignation.

“Yes, very good fellows among them, no doubt; but they’re a d — d sensible people, sir; their heads are a great deal harder and longer than yours or mine, and I pay a compliment to the nationality when I say I’d rather deal with any rogue than a Scotch one. Yes, there’s an attorney, and a Scotchman, and two Jews, sir. You see what a vice I have got into; and if Miss Laura Challys Gray, whose cruelty has brought me to this pass, wished ever so much now to undo the crime against all human feeling she has committed — she no longer could; so bend the knee no more at her shrine — that divinity is deposed. And what news of Alfred Dacre? — have you heard anything of him lately? — is he still in London? — curse him! I beg your pardon — I’ll say bless him, if that will do.”

“I don’t know — I’m not aware — I’m not in the way of hearing,” he replied.

“Then you haven’t been to see Miss Gray; for I’m told he’s in her house like a tame cat. She has got me into a bad fix, and herself into worse,” he laughed.

“No, I’ve not heard of him since,” replied the clergyman.

“Well, last night, one of those wretches who haunt me, brought me his card. You’ll see it on the chimneypiece. I would not see him; and since I’ve been thinking that possibly he was not here at all. I’m encircled by a bell of deception.”

“I can throw no light upon it.”

"I should like to know one thing," returned De Beaumirail, sitting up— "what motive he can possibly have for pursuing a poor devil like me as he does. You did not mention my rash language about Miss Gray, and my resolution to punish her, to any one?"

"I regarded that, Sir, exactly as you described it — as so many mad and reckless words. I knew very well that reflection would come to your aid, and that you could not mean it."

De Beaumirail looked down with a musing smile on his ring, and, still smiling, his angry eyes looked suddenly in the old man's face, and said he —

"I *did* mean every word I said, and I did not speak without having measured my strength and my weakness. Challys Gray shall suffer the most exemplary punishment that ever befell a vindictive woman; and if she employs Mr. Dacre any longer as a detective, he shall be suddenly relieved of his office, and she frightened half out of her wits; and you have my permission to tell her what I say."

"You threaten that young lady in cold blood!" exclaimed the old man, in indignant horror.

"Threaten her! Oh, fie! My worthy friend, be charitable. I don't threaten. Observe the distinction — the miscreant De Beaumirail threatens, say you. The prophet De Beaumirail predicts, say I."

But we must return from our excursion to Guildford House, and the little party whom we left there over their teacups.

"Well," answered Charles Mannering, setting down his cup. "It is not gunpowder, is it?"

You observe that Charles has just answered the question with which this chapter opened, so that the little episode involved really no interruption, not even of a second.

## CHAPTER XII.

### SONGS.

GRADUALLY twilight came and moonlight, and the lamp at which Mrs. Wardell, worked, and it was night.

Quite friendly, quite in the old vein, and to all outward seeming, quite unembarrassed, was the conversation, and on it flowed — not very profound, but careless, gay, and various.

Charles sat in that statuesque pose, which we may describe as riding upon his chair, with his elbows on the back of it, recounting one of those comic school adventures which are remembered with such a sense of their fun, at a much longer distance. He was looking at pretty Challys Gray, who sat listening and amused by the window as his recital proceeded in low tones.

His back was turned toward the door, so that he could not see, why on a sudden, Challys blushed so deeply, and looked so prettily embarrassed.

He looked round, and saw Mr. Dacre smiling in the doorway.

"I'm very audacious," laughed Dacre. "I know I should have waited for an invitation; but having an hour I could not resist, so I ventured, and I hope I'm forgiven."

"We are always very happy to see you, Mr. Dacre," interposed Mrs. Wardell. "It is very good of you, knowing how very lonely we are here."

"The odious puppy!" thought Charles, "with his airs of acceptance, and affectation of modesty!"

"Mr. Mannering, our cousin," she said, introducing that gentleman. The dignity of his rising was embarrassed a good deal by his attitude, but Mr. Dacre went upon his former introduction, and smiled, and spoke a word or two, as to an acquaintance.

"How encouraging!" thought Charles. "It is really too good; I'm the stranger — he's quite at home. I suppose he does the honours here, and lectures the servants."

Charles was resolved, however, that he should not lead the conversation, so he instantly began —

"By-the-bye, I met that woman you both like so much, Mrs. Mauley," said Charles Mannering, with a playful irony.

"Oh! Really!" moaned Laura.

"Dear me, how horrid!" exclaimed Mrs. Wardell, more energetically.

"And I think she meditates a visit. She said she heard you were in town, and asked me where you were," continued Charles.

"You did not tell her, I hope?" said Julia Wardell, looking straight in his face, with round eyes of horror.

"I shall leave, London at once," said Laura.

"But did you tell her?" demanded the elder lady.

"Well, you know she asked me quite straight if I knew where you were," said Charles.

"And you told her?" said Mrs. Wardell.

"Challys, you know, would be angry if I told an untruth," said he.

"Then you did tell her?" said the old lady.

"What *did* you say, Charles?" implored Laura.

"Well, Challys, I'll relieve you, I lied; I said I did not know."

"There's no harm on earth in a polite fib now and then when one can't help it," said good Mrs. Wardell.

"I don't like it, though; I feel very small after I have told one," said he.

"I don't in the least," said Mrs. Wardell. "What do you say, Mr. Dacre?"

"I? Oh, of course, I'm for simplicity — whatever is most convenient. If truth answers best, tell truth; if otherwise, fib. In nine cases out of ten, the fib is the more convenient. Human nature is too irascible, life is too short, for veracity. Why should I follow the phantom truth into quags and briars, with the straight path of mendacity before me? Wounded self-love never forgives; by all means let us spare it. For my part I lie quite frankly, whenever my duty to others or myself invites."

The young man laughed, and his eye glanced on Laura. There was in her look a pained hesitation, as if she doubted whether he was in jest or earnest; but she said nothing. She took up a book that lay on the table, and leaned back as if engrossed by it.

"I don't agree with you at all," said Charles Mannering. "Everyone, I suppose, tells an untruth now and then; but I hate it. I'm not a bit better than other fellows, but that's not my talent or taste. No, I don't agree with you."

"On that point?" asked Dacre.

"Yes," said Charles; "I don't."

"I think you'll find you do."

"Well, I hope I know myself, at least on that point."

"And now, Miss Gray, I'm going to acquit myself," said Dacre. "I not only agree with Mr. Mannering, but I go further. What I just now said is simply farce. I have suffered as much as any one from falsehood — too much not to hate it; no one on earth is more strict about truth than I. It is the solid foundation of all character, without it the most attractive is but sentiment, impulse, and illusion; it may be beautiful, but as baseless as the rainbow. Nothing so beautiful as truth."

Challys Gray felt that his glowing eyes were fixed on her, and she said —

"Well, we are all pretty well agreed, except Julia. You're the only sinner of the party."

"Oh! don't say that," said Dacre. "I'm bad enough; I only venture to give myself a character for truth, and when I give up that, I give myself up; at the same time, I'm profoundly mysterious."

"Now, Charles, it's your turn to give an account of yourself," said Mrs. Wardell.

"Thanks! If I had studied myself carefully enough, and, if I had a proper sense of my importance, perhaps I might expect you to listen; but I really can't talk of myself, where I'm not quite sure of admiration, and I almost fancy there are other people who interest me more."



Dacre laughed goodhumouredly.

"Modesty is one of the noble attributes; but what is a fellow to do who was born conceited — and that is my hard case? I'm not so bad as I was, though; one learns what one is, as years increase, and I hope I may yet come to be half as modest as I ought to have been at my best."

"I think you're quite modest enough, Mr. Dacre. I never could see the good of having too low an opinion of one's self."

"You are too goodnatured, Mrs. Wardell — too indulgent; but as I get on, I'm not so much my hero — I'm less in love with my follies; one tires of sugar — one tires even of the looking-glass; there are other things besides what is termed pleasure — other people besides one's self. Will you, Miss Gray, do me a great kindness?" he said, suddenly transferring himself to her side, and lowering his voice as he reached it. "Would you mind playing that charming thing of Beethoven's?"

"Don't ask me this evening — I feel that it would make me so sad. And — and have you heard anything more?" So said Miss Gray, looking inquiringly into his eyes for a moment. Charles was almost unconsciously watching them with a covert side glance, and he saw still on her cheek the tinge of that blush.

He turned away, stung and alarmed; his pride and jealousy were awake again, and he entered on a little careless conversation with Mrs. Wardell on a new book upon the treatment, education, and dietetics of lapdogs, which interested that good lady so earnestly that she set down her crochet and discussed the whole matter with a mind greedy of knowledge, if also a little dogmatic.

"I expected to ascertain something last night," said Dacre. "I went, after I had the pleasure of seeing you, to the prison, for the purpose of seeing De Beaumirail, but he would not admit me. I pressed it all I could, but a perverse demon had got possession of him, — and he resolutely refused to see me. I'm quite certain he will, though. I brought an influence with me; but next time I shall bring one still more powerful. Rely upon me. I never yet took a thing up that I did not carry through; so don't lose faith in me, because my discovery has been postponed from day to day."

Here was a little pause, and he said —

"So you won't play that Beethoven tonight?"

"I can't; but you admitted you could sing, and for us you never have sung," said Miss Gray.

"If you say I must sing, I will."

"That's very good of you."

"No, not a bit," he said in a lower tone, for I can't help obeying you; it is so delightful to be commanded by Miss Gray."

"That's very pretty, at all events; and now I shall test your sincerity. What do you sing? Do you know the tenors of any of the Italian operas?"

"Some."

"Don Pasquale?"

"Yes."

"Well, then, the serenade, 'Come gentil.' Julia, Mr. Dacre is going to sing a song for us."

"Oh! that's very good of you, Mr. Dacre."

Chalys Gray played the accompaniment, and Dacre sang; yes, Alfred Dacre sang, so exquisitely, with a voice so ringing and plaintive, that one might have fancied the great tenor of those days in the room.

Dacre was surely a great musician; but we all know it is one thing to fill a drawingroom, and quite another to fill Her Majesty's theatre. Perhaps this chamber-tenor was better here than the great tenor would have been. Other things he sang, making no difficulty, pleased at the delight and wonder of at least some of his little audience. Then there were songs in which Chalys, not knowing them, gave up the piano to him, and listened in a rapture; and then he said —

"Do you know, Miss Gray, I long ago took the subject of that piece of Beethoven's, and made a song of it."

He touched the accompaniment lightly, hummed the air for a moment, and then sang. The words were odd, mysterious, melancholy. Sitting by the window, leaning on her hand, looking out, Laura listened in a rapture that was almost agony, and the fountains of her heart were opened, and tears flowed down her cheeks.

"Thank you very much, Mr. Dacre; it is quite a gift. What a resource you must find your music. It is a most charming talent," said Mrs. Wardell. "Isn't it?" she appealed to Charles.

"My praise is very little worth," said he; "I'm no musician. But," he added, for this sounded rather grudgingly, "I can venture to say what gives me pleasure, and I have seldom listened to music with more."

"I shall be more conceited than ever," said Dacre, giving Charles a smile.

That young gentleman's quick glance searched the smile in vain for a latent mockery. Nothing like an irony was there. It was goodhumoured, and seemed to say —

"I understand your feeling; but why should we quarrel? I'm disposed to like you."

The person whom Dacre most wished to please sat still at the window, looking out, and said nothing. He looked towards her, and then back again at Mrs. Wardell.

"You have inspired us all with romance and sentiment by that delicious music. There's Laura looking out at the moonlight, and I have tangled my worsteds."

"That, certainly, is most gratifying evidence. I wish my poor music could move me ever so little."

"Why, it must. You could not sing with so much feeling if it didn't," said Julia Wardell.

"I don't know. Nothing moves me much now — not even dinner, or money."

"Money!" exclaimed Mrs. Wardell.

"Yes, of course. Riches represent everything we respect on earth," said Mr. Dacre.

"Not everything, I hope, Mr. Dacre," said the old lady, gravely.

"You're quite right — except rank, and, as I said, dinner."

"Oh! fie, Mr. Dacre; you're really too bad."

"As a rule, men have but one determined principle, which is their interest," he continued; "their Passions may cross and perplex it, but it is there. If we affect to despise money, we must change our manners."

"Oh! you're a — what is it? — a cynic, Mr. Dacre. It's quite shocking to hear such sentiments from anyone who can sing like you!" exclaimed Mrs. Wardell.

Dacre laughed. He went over to the window and said very low —

"My hour has flown — come like shadows, so depart — and I return to darkness. May I come again, Miss Gray?"

"Do — yes — we shall be so glad to see you; thank you so much for singing — so, very much."

He held her hand ever so little longer than usual, pressed it a little more, and without another word he returned, and took his leave of Mrs. Wardell.

To Charles he held out his hand with the same kindly smile. "I shan't forget your approbation; a musician is never without vanity, and — — " Whatever he was going to say he forgot it, or, perhaps, put it off. At all events he shook hands, smiled, and, with another "good night" to the ladies, he disappeared. Laura, at the window, saw a carriage glide swiftly under the branches of the old spreading trees, and away.

"I'm afraid Mr. Dacre thought you were offended with him," said the elder lady, reprovingly. "It seemed so odd you never said one word about his music, and he was so obliging."

"I dare say; I forgot," answered Challys, rising dreamily. "But that piece of Beethoven's — dear Mary used to play it, and it always makes me sad — and very sad I felt tonight."

"But was not his singing quite magnificent?" exclaimed Julia Wardell.

"I dare say — I suppose so. Was it?" exclaimed Laura Gray.

"Was it, indeed? You're enough to put one out of patience," said Mrs. Wardell.

"What did *you* think of it?" she appealed to Charles.

"As I said, I'm no judge; but it seemed to me more like that of a public singer than an amateur. I should not be surprised if he turned out to be an artist, as they call themselves."

"Oh, no — that's not conceivable!" exclaimed the old lady. "Why, Challys, he says that Mr. Dacre is a public singer!"

"I don't think there is anything theatrical in his manner; but I don't know, I'm sure. I only know that I wish he had not sung that thing from Beethoven. It made me sad, and nothing's so sleepy as sadness. So I think I shall say good night."

Charles came out to the lobby to light her candle for her, and to say "good night" once more.

"Good night, Charlie," she said, with a smile a little sad, but very kind, "and I'm so much obliged to you for coming; it was very good of you."

Up the broad stair she went. He remained looking until she disappeared; then, with a sigh, he returned to the drawingroom, and what more passed between him and Mrs. Wardell, was not, I believe, particularly interesting.

## CHAPTER XIII.

### THE SILVER DRAGON.

AS Alfred Dacre placed himself in his brougham he smiled. As they turned the corner at the gate, he looked back at Guildford House — at the drawingroom window, from which the light was gleaming — smiling still, but with a shrewd, odd smile.

The carriage whirled on, and he laughed merrily — *Vive la bagatelle!* Then he grew grave, very grave — sinking down from level to level, till he had reached that point which is deep thought. As we know, his hands were pretty full, and his brain teeming with all kinds of little plans.

When Charles Mannering reached his chambers that night, he found, among more serious letters, a little note in his letter-box, which could not have been dropped there many minutes. It was signed “Alfred Dacre,” and said: —

“MY DEAR MR. MANNERING, — I should so much wish that we knew one another better. There are things on which your advice, by-and-by, would be more useful to me than you can imagine. See what selfish creatures we are! It is this instinct that prompts me to violate forms, and venture to ask you to dine with me tomorrow. Pray do come. You mentioned accidentally this evening that you had no particular engagement for tomorrow except to see the billiard match played. That won't be till eleven. I enclose a note for your friend — Captain Transom, I think — who, you mentioned, is to accompany you. Pray persuade him to come with you first to me. I have written to order dinner at such a quaint comfortable old inn, called the Silver Dragon, just three miles out of town, on the old road to — . All the livery-stable people know it. It is quite an adventure dining there, it is so quaint and pretty. You will be charmed with it. I have told the people to expect us at six, but don't hesitate to change the hour if another suits you better. A line to Miniver's will always find me. Should I not hear, I will conclude that all is settled.

“Ever yours, very truly,

“ALFRED DACRE.”

Charles Mannering, as we know, did not like him; but somehow he was flattered. In spite of himself, he smiled as he read it.

“It's a bore, but one can't be absolutely churlish, and he's so very pressing,” thought Charles, and the result was that he took his friend, Captain Transom, down with him to the Silver Dragon, where that handsome fellow Dacre received them with a hospitality that was a little ceremonious and foreign, but also very cordial and fascinating.

The Silver Dragon reminds one of the May-Pole in “Barnaby Rudge” — a miniature May-Pole — antique, quaint, and gabled, with stone chimneys, some spiral, some octagonal at the base and cylindrical upwards, like the barrels of old-fashioned pocket-pistols. There is an old pigeon-house, and half a dozen trees at each side flank the space in front. There is a hedged garden at one side, and tall old pear and cherry trees show themselves in the air. Hollyhocks and roses grow outside, and tint the old place pleasantly, and the great sign of the Silver Dragon swings between two posts at the roadside, with store of florid and gilded ironwork above. I speak of it in the present tense, forgetting the flight of years. I wonder whether the Silver Dragon holds his own still, or has gone, like St. George's, into the land of dreams.

This day there was a cricket match going on in the field in front of the old inn, and the Ticklepitchers were whacking and running with all their might in their second innings. The bright green field, with its clumps of ancient trees and its old-fashioned white paling, with the lively sounds and sights of the cricket match, gave a vivacity to a scene which might otherwise have been perhaps a little drowsy.

Before the door of the Silver Dragon, as they arrived, stood an elderly gentleman in tweed trousers, white hat, and white waistcoat, and a black frock coat — a somewhat clumsy figure with an unprepossessing countenance, and whiskers, moustache and hair all white. He was smoking a cigar, and from the elevation of the steps he surveyed the landscape.

“Mr. Dacre here?” inquired Charles Mannering of the waiter.

“He's just walked round that way to the oaks, — or, as he pronounced it, *hoax*, — not five minutes ago, to meet two town gentlemen who is for dinner here, ordered at six, sir.”

It was plain, from a covert glance, that the waiter suspected the new arrivals to be the two gentlemen who, in his undignified phrase, were “for dinner.”

“Well, what shall we do?” said Charles, turning to Transom.

“We may miss if we follow him.”

“He'll be here again, sir, in five minutes. He thought you might come that way.”

“Ho! that will be Mr. Dacre, then,” said the old fellow in the white hat, interposing unceremoniously — “the young man that's walked round there.” He was indicating the direction with the end of his cigar. “I thought I knew his face — I know all about him — is he stopping here?”

“No, sir — only come down for dinner.”

“Well, I vote we stay where we are,” said Charles, looking at Transom, who agreeing, walked down the steps, and looked about him a little.

Charles, who remembered the white-hatted smoker's remarks about Dacre, addressed a few polite observations to him, which the old fellow received with a shrewd civility. Perhaps he had no objection to talk a little with the young man.

“We've just run down to meet a friend of *yours*, I think you said — Mr. Dacre.”

“Well, I can't say a friend, though, by my faith, he should be my friend, for I helped him to one or two *deseerable* things in the way of business; but I have met him only in that way, sir; and that not over frequently; he's a fine young man, sir; and I know everything about him; and I wish I had his money, sir — by my troth, sir, it wouldn't hurt either of us.”

At this moment the waiter apprized the old gentleman that his dinner awaited him.

“Who is that gentleman?” inquired Charles, as soon as he was gone.

“That's Mr. Gillespie, sir. He's a banker, sir, or something, in London, sir.”

"Ho! Scotchman, too," reflected Charles, "good men of business — likely to know — I wish his dinner had not been ready so soon — but a man may have money and be a *mauvais sujet* — a banker — that Scotch fellow — it's a convenient title — banker — a usurer — I dare say."

In another moment Dacre had arrived, and they were chatting gaily together.

"I'll run down, if you let me, after dinner, and have a look at those fellows; there's a jolly good hit to leg," said Transom, from the steps at the inn door. It was his farewell speech, as they went into the comfortable long, low dining-room, wainscoted in oak, and with a glass door at the other end affording a view of the flowers and fruit trees of the garden.

Very friendly was the host; gay, too, and agreeable. An excellent dinner the Silver Dragon afforded, and wine so good that a learned Judge — noted in his day for a shrewd perception of vintages and flavours — used to make a point of dining at that out-of-the-way little hostelry half-a-dozen times in the year.

When they had dined, and had some wine, and chatted pleasantly for a time, Transom remembered the cricket, and, with permission, ran away to see. Now it was a *tête-à-tête*, and Charles Mannering fancied that Dacre was about perhaps to approach some subjects that specially interested him. But he did not. He chatted on very pleasantly, but somehow he was not making himself at all better known to Mr. Mannering, in the sense in which he had expected, nor was he even growing more intimate in any way. He was disclosing nothing of his life and adventures, nor even of his character, for his reflections on life were seasoned with a spirit of mockery which left Charles in doubt as to whether they represented anything but the whim of the hour.

Over the chimneypiece clicked an old Louis Quatorze clock, and as he looked into the garden, Charles Mannering fancied he saw his host now and then glance at its dial.

"The fellow thinks I may be in his way at Guildford House, and that I am to be managed by a little flattery and attention, and everything made easy, and a troublesome cousin cajoled. Hi is counting the minutes till it is time to get away, and laughing at my simplicity."

Charles was nettled. If this dinner was meant to propitiate him, it had no such pleasant effect, but a good deal the reverse.

"I think, Mr. Dacre," said Charles, "I once knew a friend of yours, a Mr. Vanhomrigh?"

"Where did he live?" inquired Dacre.

He had a very pretty house at Richmond."

"Ha! the very man; then you've heard that story?"

Charles had not expected this, and he felt a little awkward. But Mr. Dacre was perfectly himself, and unusually grave, and he continued serenely —

"I did know him — I've known all sorts of people in my life — I used to consult him about pictures. Otherwise, I think we'll agree, your friend was not a desirable acquaintance; but being a man of some learning and great brutality, he was looked upon as a philosopher, and I did not care what he was, he was not pretty; and there was a peculiarity, you recollect, about his head?"

"Ah, perhaps there was, I don't quite remember."

"It was this, his head had no brains in it, and so he was always guided by his own strong common *non*-sense. He did me the honour to be jealous of me, although his wife was, upon my honour, as indifferent to me as if she had been my own. He insisted on a duel. I shot him only through both legs — a little higher and I should have rid the world, and particularly Mrs. Vanhomrigh, of a bore. But while I — if there be any force in the ordeal — was inscribing the proofs of my innocence upon his legs, his wife was testifying to the same fact, in an equally satisfactory manner, by going away with a Mr. Tromperant. We parted — Mr. Vanhomrigh and I — affectionately, and I don't believe he called Mr. Tromperant out."

"Oh!" said Charles, a little dryly: "people used, I've heard, to tell that a little differently."

"Ah! did they? You heard she ran away with quite a different person — with me, in fact."

"Well, I confess it was something a little like that — and — and — but it was very absurd," hesitated Charles Mannering.

"Tell me, I entreat, what it was. Don't think me a fool; such things never vex me — nothing offends me in a friend but reserve."

Charles looked at him for a moment shrewdly, and then down, and smiled a little awkwardly. The inquisitor was suffering more than the person undergoing the question. In fact, the examination was beginning to be inverted, and the *éclaircissement* approached at an inconveniently rapid pace. Mr. Dacre smiled very good naturedly.

"So many things one hears are — are —" hesitated Charles.

"I know — utterly absurd," said Dacre; "but if my friends do hear them, and that they affect me, I protest against being kept in the dark, be it what it may — pray tell me all about it." "Well the story is that you ran away with her; her husband divorced her, and *you* then married her," said Mannering, with a little shrug and a laugh, making nothing of it.

"Ho! There's the whole epic in a nutshell, and simply a lie from first to last. She went away not with me, but a Mr. Tromperant. I don't know whether Vanhomrigh divorced his wife or not, but I'm ready to swear I never married her."

Here was a short silence.

"Is the woman alive still?" he resumed, perfectly carelessly. "If she is, pray do me the kindness to sift the story to the bottom. I never was married; but it is very clever of you to have collected so many of the apocryphal gospels that profess to record my life, and very good of you, I'm sure, to tell me what they say."

"One can't help hearing things, you know; and as you wished me to tell you all about these stories, I could not well refuse."

"I can never thank you enough. Fame has, however, done me too much honour. I did not marry Vanhomrigh's wife; and as to divorce, in this shameless and cold-blooded age, I don't know why people ever think of it, seeing that marriage is itself a standing divorce, without the inconvenience or the scandal, and with this advantage, that husband and wife can resume one another whenever they choose. I'm not speaking my sentiments, mind, but those of a great many people of my acquaintance."

"I quite understand," said Mannering, and sipped a little claret.

"And quite to put an end to that part of the rumour, which, you see, is not pleasant. The next time you and I meet Ardenbroke together, I will ask him the question in your presence. When does he return, by-the-by?"

"I believe his stay in Scotland is likely to be longer than he expected. But, pray, don't mind asking him, or, if you should, I have no right in the world to be present, and I should not like it."

"Ah, Mr. Mannering, do you think that quite fair?" said Dacre, with a smile, and a little shake of his head. "I find you're possessed of a variety of disagreeable stories about me — utterly untrue — and one of them such as no man ought to leave unanswered. Now, as I find you in a position to circulate that report, I put it to your honour — *reflect* — have I not a right to ask permission to arm you with its contradiction?"

"No man can help hearing reports as they circulate. You have contradicted that one in my presence," said Charles, "and, of course, I can have no difficulty in saying I've heard you do so."

"No; you're very good — that's quite true," said Dacre, "and my denial will be accepted for precisely what it is worth — you are good enough to set as high a value almost as I do upon it — but it will be rated at the value the world places on all such currency. It is the denial simply of the person interested in denying it, don't you see? and although you and I know it is true, the world won't, and in that bank it won't be accepted."

"Unlucky for you, Mr. Dacre; but still I can't see that I am called on to ask for, or publish Ardenbroke's testimony in the matter, and I must, once for all, decline the kind of prominence you are good enough to propose for me."

"I wish, dear Mannering, I could agree with you;" and suddenly changing his subject with a change of tone, he said, "the sun is already down; and that beautiful moon — it will become more brilliant as the glow in the west fades away — delicious evening! What do you say to a walk across the fields?"

"Yes, quite charming," said Charles, recovering.

"A glass of sherry before we start?" said Dacre — "Delicious evening, certainly! That sort of sky sets a fellow ruminating. What a background for a reverie — pleasant, of course, *couleur de rose*, old echoes mix in our music — we are always looking over our shoulders as we march on — retrospective creatures — we are. I was popular, I have been so consistently; of course, one can't be popular, unless one is a great deal more amusing than I can ever hope or attempt to be, without money, for poverty is universally disgusting. I have good Spirits. I have a sort of commiseration for fools. I enjoy the ridiculous without exposing it; and I am under no constraint with knaves; in short, I am conscious of some ingredients of a man of the world."

"That's a character I don't aspire to — I feel my incompetence. — I have not the moral talents," said Charles.

"How tiresome," added Mannering, inwardly — that fellow's incessant talk about himself!

And recovering from this incoherent little digression, Dacre returned to his projected ramble over the sheepwalk.

"We can get through that little garden to the path, I know it perfectly. The walk is quite Arcadian; just at the other side of that foreground, you get into an undulating sheepwalk, wooded with old timber, and utterly solitary; the loneliest place you ever saw in your life; a very singular scene. I undertake to say you'll never forget it while you live. But take some more wine, won't you?"

"Not any, thanks."

"Some coffee."

"No, thanks. Where does the path come out upon the old London road?"

"Not a mile from this."

Charles pushed open the glass-door, and walked a few steps into the quaint little garden, and looked westward, where the quickly fading tints of a splendid sunset still flushed and gilded the sky.

Dacre touched the bell —

"This is all right, is it?"

"Yes, sir, to be paid by the old gentleman — Scotch, I think he is, sir, upstairs, we know him here, sir."

"Yes, and there's a message. Where is Captain Transom?"

"Talking outside with the gentleman as played in the match, sir."

"Well, tell him that Mr. Mannering has gone across the fields, and will meet him about a mile on the road to London. Tell the driver to pull up at the Seven Oaks, stile; he knows it; and say to Captain Transom that Mr. Mannering will probably be there before he arrives, and don't let him delay here."

Then Dacre walked out and joined Charles Mannering among the trees and flowers in the deepening twilight.

## CHAPTER XIV.

### A MOONLIT WALK.

THROUGH a little wicket in the hedge Mr. Dacre led him, and at the other side of the narrow bye-road on which it opened was a stile, by which they mounted to the path he had indicated.

"How rapidly that sunset glow is fading," said Dacre, "the transition from sunset to moonlight, how beautiful it is! There is a brief struggle of the two — the dark crisis of the process. To me, it always seemed like the passing of a life, from this beautiful world to the more beautiful world of spirits, through the momentary darkness of death."

"But what of Transom?" said Charles, who was not much of a poet, "we can't leave him behind."

"It's all right, he's gone on in your carriage to meet you at the stile, a little way on. Let us get up this little steep, and from the top you'll see that pretty Arcadia. How balmy and delicious the air is this evening?"

"Yes, certainly, it is," said Charles, stopping for a moment, and looking upward to the stars.

"This is about the most puzzling light," said Dacre; "by the time we reach that little eminence the struggle will have ended, and the moonlight will prevail."

They sauntered slowly up the slope in silence, and by the time they reached its crest, a brilliant moonlight silvered the landscape below them.

"Now, look there; is not it charming — that wavy slope, studded with straggling clumps of trees? You can't see the road; the sward looks as if it passed unbroken into those misty low grounds, miles away. I think it quite beautiful. It is so parklike, neglected, and solitary."

"Yes, it does look like a place where an ambuscade would have you at a disadvantage," said Charles Mannering. "A sheepwalk, you say?"

"Well, you may be a painter — I know you're a musician — but there's no tempting you to be a poet," said Dacre, with a faint laugh. "You are determined to be an Englishman. You can see objects now pretty well — the trunk of that tree, for instance. I can see all the knots and wrinkles in it, and it's twenty yards away." He looked at his watch. "Yes, I can see it perfectly," and he looked shrewdly down the slope as if in search of some distant object. "Let us get on; how sharp our shadows look upon the grass."

"Yes, the mist has nearly melted; it is like a frosty moonlight," said Charles, as they marched lightly along, side by side, "and yet the air is so soft."

"Yes, a frosty moonlight," agreed Dacre, "and before we reach that group of birch trees — how wonderfully light and graceful they are, and those silvery stems — before we get there it will be more intense still. I never saw such moonlight on an English landscape; just as if it came for us. It is, really, come on purpose."

He stopped on a little eminence again as it seemed searching in the distance for some expected object.

"Looking for anything?" inquired Mannering.

"Yes — a — nothing very particular — we'll see it time enough — my carriage, and a friend waiting in it. I expect it — that's all. It certainly is a delicious night, and, as you say, a miraculously brilliant moonlight. *There* yes, that's it, I think."

"Where?" asked Mannering, who stopped at his side.

"Do you see that little, broken eminence at your right, with an ash tree growing by it?"

"Yes," said Charles, pointing towards it.

"That's what I mean. Well, a good deal further on is a clump of several trees — oaks they are — and a little to the right of them is a carriage, I think," said Dacre, in a slow conjectural way.

"Yes, I see — it is, I think," said Mannering.

"It *certainly* is," said Dacre in a tone of relief. "Well, it has been a very charming walk. So sweet a night tempts one to linger.

There had been growing in Dacre's manner, Charles thought, something *distract* and odd that was oppressive. He paused, and placed his hand gently on Charles's arm, and smiling faintly, he said —

"And now, dear Mannering, to resume — I was going to say, a little more at length, what I venture to hope, and even to expect from your kindness."

"Resume, you say?"

"Yes, if you allow me."

"All right," said Charles, "I'll hear you with pleasure."

"I hope — in fact I am sure — I have only to throw myself on your good feeling to ensure the few and reasonable concessions which on reflection appear to me, under the circumstances I shall describe, quite indispensable."

These words sounded very unpleasantly in Charles Mannering's ears, and he felt for a moment as if he had misheard him.

"And, on consideration, I have every hope they will strike you in the same light," continued Dacre. "Suppose we go on slowly toward those trees; the stile is there, and both carriages now — don't you see two?"

"Yes, I believe there are," said Charles, who began to feel as if he were walking in a dream.

"I mentioned, you recollect, what I thought myself warranted in expecting from your own sense of justice, with respect to the absurd, and, in some of its consequences, cruel rumour, which I have too much reason to believe you have been the instrument, of course with the most honourable intentions, of reviving."

"I thought, Mr. Dacre, I had made myself sufficiently clear upon that matter."

"Quite — perfectly clear; but with your intelligence and good feeling, I don't at all despair of bringing you to see it a little differently — in fact, to take precisely my view of what is fair in this case, before we reach that clump of trees, which it won't take us five minutes to do."

“Very well,” said Charles.

“Yes, both carriages *are* there,” said Dacre, who had been continuing his scrutiny while he talked.

“Yes, I do see them now,” acquiesced Charles.

“And about what I was saying — we none of us like, my dear Mr. Mannering, the idea of constraint — the consciousness that we are watched, and the feeling that behind our backs all sorts of stories are being collected, and, perhaps, being retailed. Would you mind not walking quite so fast? Thanks; and it is not merely disagreeable; positive inconvenience, and even injury may result from it.”

“I don’t care a farthing who watches *me*” said Charles.

“That is because you are so frank and manly, and have in reality nothing to conceal. Now, it is not quite so with me — at this moment I can’t be frank — in the interest altogether of others. I can’t be, in that sense, manly. Serious mischief to others might result from my making my presence in London known, except to a very few; and, my dear Mannering, I am going to represent to you how hard you have been upon me — to make my little complaint and appeal; and I shan’t tire you — you shall know all that is in my mind in three minutes’ time.”

## CHAPTER XV.

### THE ULTIMATUM.

"AN appeal *ad misericordiam*," thought Charles, with a secret satisfaction. "He'll be disappointed in me; I'm not, I rather think, a person to be flattered or cajoled. He thinks I have an influence at Guildford House, and he intends to use it. Very good, Mr. Dacre, we shall see."

"I have persuaded you to come and dine with me in this out-of-the-way place," continued Dacre, "shall I confess it? — with an object. With you I can afford to be perfectly candid, and I shall speak with the confidence of a brother. Ah! Mr. Mannering, Mr. Mannering, you have been treating me very oddly; haven't you?" He smiled archly, and shook his head as he placed his hand gently on Charles Mannering's arm. "You followed me when I took my leave, on the night of my visit to your chambers; you followed me, on another night, all the way to the Fleet, when I went to see that miserable fellow, Guy de Beaumirail; and you have been busy among your Mends, at the clubs, collecting all the old women's tales affecting me that your gossiping friends could bring to mind — scandals, falsehoods, I do assure you, if you but knew the circumstances, the most incredible, and the blackest; and with this evidence, you array a case for the ear of that very tribunal by which we all desire to be favourably heard, and at least fairly judged — private friendship. Ah! my good friend, is that generous, or just, or at all the measure by which you would have it measured to you again?"

"You admit, Mr. Dacre," said Charles, "that you are practising, necessarily just now, a strict reserve. That, of course, is a matter entirely for yourself, and which, I'm quite aware, it would be most impertinent of me to remark on; in fact, I can have no interest in it so long as it does not involve anyone who has a natural claim upon my care, and — and that sort of thing. But those circumstances of concealment, you know, don't do so well to found new acquaintances and intimacies upon, especially in families where there is so little experience and knowledge of the world, as in that at Guildford House; and as they know absolutely nothing, except a word or two, of no real importance, from Ardenbroke, whom you have put under conditions of reserve — I, as one of Miss Gray's few relations, and the only one at present near her, think myself obliged to inquire a little, and, in fact, take some little trouble, such as a brother, if she had one, ought to take in such a case; and I can't see that in doing so I commit the slightest impertinence."

"How provoking, dear Mannering, that we should so entirely differ in opinion in a thing so nearly affecting both of us — I may say personally affecting us. Would you mind stopping here for a moment? We have got so near the road, and I want ever so little talk with you quietly. Thanks." He looked upward for a moment with a meditative smile. The transparent azure of heaven opened above him with hardly a filmy cloud in its great concave; and the brightness of the moon was almost dazzling. Etherealized in that wonderful light, his handsome features for a moment moved the admiration even of Charles Mannering. For a few seconds the faint, fixed smile was seen in that light, and then Mr. Dacre looked, still smiling, in Charles Mannering's face.

"I wish so much, my dear Mannering, I could persuade you to take a different view of your duty."

A pause occurred here, but Mannering made no sign.

"Because otherwise the situation becomes so painful."

There was another pause, but Charles only looked down, and switched the grass slightly with his cane; he was not going to recede.

"For I can't allow that kind of thing to go on, do you see; I can't, really, for one hour more."

Charles looked up in his face, with an inquisitive sternness; he did not quite see his drift. Dacre's handsome features still wore that faint smile, and he shook his head gently.

"No, indeed, Mr. Mannering: I'm sorry it has come to this, but I can't. We must understand one another; I shall be perfectly explicit; and I still venture to hope that, on reflection, you will see the reasonableness of what I have to propose."

Here was a wait of a second or more.

"Pray go on. I don't see — I confess I don't understand at present," said Charles Mannering a little stiffly.

"Well, as I say, I still speak in hope. I have one or two very simple and, I think, fair conditions to propose. If you agree with me in so thinking, and consequently accept them, we continue good friends; if not, why then it is very unlucky, and I'm very sorry."

"And what are your conditions, as you call them?" asked Charles.

"Yes, my conditions; well, they are just these — you have followed me about on two occasions, to my knowledge; well, it is only fair that I should ask that all that sort of thing, whether done by yourself, or your friend, or your servant, should totally cease; you have been making inquiries about me, the places I frequent, and so on. I have to entreat of you to make no more inquiries about me. That's also quite clear."

Here was a silence while you could count two, but Charles Mannering made no sign.

"You have been collecting foolish stories about me, and possibly retailing them; I quite excuse you, but I must stipulate also that all *that* shall absolutely cease; and lastly, dear Mannering, not at all seeing in your remote cousinship your obligation to charge yourself with the duties of a brother to Miss Gray, and not choosing while myself employed by that lady upon a difficult and not unimportant affair, to be watched and misapprehended, I have one more earnest and friendly request to submit, and that is, that for the present your visits at Guildford House shall be discontinued."

At this last demand Charles Mannering flushed up to his temples.

"By Jove!" said he, with an angry laugh, "that's cool, isn't it? I don't think I ever heard anything so impertinent in all my life, by heaven!"

"I was half afraid you'd think so," said Mr. Dacre, "still while a hope was possible I ventured to try; and since my little proposal has fallen through, there only remains the unpleasant alternative. It can all be arranged in a few minutes."



"I don't understand you; but if you mean that we should fight, I'll meet you when and where you like; and the sooner the better," said Charles Mannering sharply, with gleaming eyes, and a face now pale and contracted.

He had been on the point of striking Dacre with the little walking-stick he clutched tightly in his fingers.

Dacre smiled and nodded slightly.

"No need to wait a moment; your friend, Captain Transom, can speak to mine, who's here, also; and he'll find everything that is necessary. This light will answer perfectly."

"I dare say; I don't care; as bad for one as the other."

Incensed, agitated, Charles Mannering strode onward and under the old oaks, over the stile.

"By Jove, I thought you'd never come down from your moonlight and poetry," said Transom, whose head was sticking out of the window, "the Ticklepitchers won, I suppose you heard, with five wickets to go down. Anything wrong? what's the matter?" he added, observing the expression of his friend's face.

"Nothing — just a word — get out for a moment, and walk a bit up here," answered Charles.

## CHAPTER XVI.

### ONE — TWO.

“TRANSOM, I’ve got into a scrape — a row with that fellow, and I suppose we must fight,” said Charles, in a low tone, looking very grim and pale.

“What fellow? What the deuce? What’s the row?” inquired Transom, very much astonished.

“That fellow Dacre — I don’t know what he is — I suppose he’s gentleman enough to be shot at, and upon my soul he’s the most impertinent snob, besides, that I could have imagined.”

“But what’s the quarrel, and what do you want, and what are you going to do?” demanded Transom.

“Going to fight, I suppose,” said Charles.

“Well, but that’s quite gone out now, you know, and by Jove they make it a very serious business — you know all about that,” said Captain Transom, uneasily.

“I’m very sorry, Transom, to give you any trouble, but you were always such a good fellow, and I know you won’t see your old schoolfellow floored for want of someone to stand by him.”

“No — *certainly* — of course — but what *is* — ““Oh, it’s just impertinence — he wants me to consent to things — in fact, to do what I *won’t* do, and to let him bully me.”

“I’d like to settle it, though. Who’s, that fellow coming up the field towards us. — can’t it be arranged, hang it?”

“I think not — I’m sure it can’t — there’s, no way except by my submitting to be bullied by that cur, and, whatever his reason, it must go on.”

“That’s Dacre’s man, I suppose — why I haven’t had time to think — it’s very odd if nothing can be done,” said Captain Transom, “surely there can be nothing to make a shot so inevitable.”

The tall, slim gentleman was approaching, having raised his hat from his head in courteous salutation, and was now only little more than a dozen steps away.

“Yes,” said Mannering, lifting his hat in return — “very likely — and if it is, mind, no compromise. Dacre wants me to make submissions such as no gentleman could dream of. I have nothing whatever to say — if he chooses to recede he may, but otherwise this thing must go on — for I’ll *not* give way, not an inch.”

The Frenchman, for so he turned out to be, now presented himself with a very grave and ceremonious courtesy to Charles Mannering, and begged, in rather laborious and grotesque English, an introduction to his friend.

There was something in the serene and businesslike manner of this gentleman amounting, in Mannering’s opinion, to evidence of his having been brought down to this place for the express service in which he was now busy — a very cold-blooded procedure — and the sense of this made Charles a little haughty, and even surly.

He presented his friend Captain Transom and walked away some score steps.

Was it a dream? With intense excitement comes a sort of quietude which answers the purposes of coolness quite the reverse of that insensibility which phlegmatic natures exhibit. This is not akin to dullness and relaxation — it is the highest tension to which human nerves can be drawn, and awakes to its keenest perception every sense.

In this state, so unlike the normal life, he turned about and saw the tall, slight figure of the Frenchman, standing close to the stouter figure of his friend Transom. The colloquy did not last five minutes. Charles was walking to and fro with measured tread, like a sentinel. Transom turned and approached him.

Charles Mannering advanced a step or two to meet him. He knew by Transom’s face before he spoke that there was nothing cheerful to report.

“Well, that old French fellow, very gentlemanlike he is, but he says Mr. Dacre can’t withdraw or qualify any one of the conditions he proposes — that he conceives your looking after him, and inquiring, to be a perpetual insult, and that you would use opportunities, were he to permit a continuation of your visits in a certain quarter, for purposes of your own, and with the effect of frustrating his exertions to be of use where he has promised his services.”

“He lies, then,” exclaimed Charles.

“Of course he does — Dacre I mean; and have you perfectly made up your mind, is it really worth having this thing go on?”

“I can’t help it; I won’t be bullied by that fellow; it must go on.”

“Well, it’s devilish odd they want to fight now,” said Transom.

“Certainly, I’d much rather now, this, moment; but where can we get pistols? It’s a long way into town,” said Charles.

“They have brought two cases and everything quite fair; I’m to have choice, but the time, the hour, you know, although there’s light, it’s so unusual; there was, to be sure, that duel about two months ago in the Bois de Boulogne; but on that ground we may, of course, put it off till morning. What do you say?”

“Don’t put it off a moment; I hate delay; let us have it at once and have done with it,” said Charles.

“Well, you know, for my part, I agree with you; I’d rather have it now and over, a great deal; have you ever been in a thing of this kind before?”

“Never; but I’ve fired pistols, of course, often.”

“I see, they’re bringing in those things — I must be off in a minute — but never you mind — you’ll be all right if you do as I tell you.”

Charles, looking down the slope saw the tall, slight figure of the Frenchman carrying a flat box in his hand, and followed closely by a man bearing a second like it. Of course he knew very well what these things were.

“I was going to say, I think that fellow Dacre is vicious — you must hit him if you can the first shot. Do you know anything of shooting? you’ll have to fire at the word, you know — ready, fire, and a goodnatured fellow will always say it as quick as he

can to prevent mischief.”

“Thanks, I see; no, I know nothing of pistols — nothing since I was a boy shooting at a board.”

“I know; well, I shall have to go in a moment, so listen. I won’t set the hair-trigger, if it has one; I’ll give you the pistol at full-cock; when you take it you must keep your arm loose, on no account stiffen it as you raise it, just trace with your eye an imaginary line along the grass between the muzzle of your pistol and your adversary’s body. There, that fellow’s bowing. In a moment, monsieur, I shall do myself the honour to attend you,” he called aloud, and added in the low key in which he had “been speaking, “Let your arm swing slightly in the direction of that line, so that when the word comes you can carry it right up to the level, keep it extended all the time, swing it from the shoulder, you are not to bend it for the world, you understand; now I must go.”

Down the slope he went, apologizing to monsieur as he approached. Charles Mannering continued his march backward and forward and saw them, not thirty yards away, arranging what are called the preliminaries, dividing the weapons, and then proceeding to load them.

Charles Mannering was no coward, but the minutes so passed were anything but comfortable. “However long the time may seem,” he thought, “ten minutes, in reality, must see this sickening business over and all settled, one way or other,” and this thought constantly recurring helped him through the interval.

And now the adversaries were placed. It was to be a duel after the English fashion. The two men, each stationary in his place, to fire together— “one, two,” the word being *two*.

Charles saw the French gentleman place his pistol in Dacre’s hand, and add a confidential word or two, with ‘extended palms and a little shrug.

“Now, think nothing about him but that you’re sure to hit him,” said Transom, quite steady, but looking pale and excited, “and mind, old fellow, don’t touch the trigger a moment too soon, and measure a line from your foot to his, and keep your arm straight, and swinging from the *shoulder*; mind, and when all’s ready look hard and Steady at your man till you can see nothing else. You’ll wing him the first shot; and I’ll bet you what you like he doesn’t go near you.”

With these encouraging words he withdrew. The cold intense moonlight showed him the slender figure of Dacre as sharply defined as if it had been in daylight, and struck brightly on the barrel of the pistol.

Transom, it had been agreed, was to give the word. “Gentlemen,” said he, addressing them from his safe point of observation, “you don’t move until I’ve done speaking; when all’s ready I shall say, ‘One, two,’ and at the word *two*, you fire; and now, gentlemen, if you are not ready, say so.”

They were both silent, and perfectly motionless.

“One, two,” cried Transom.

Instantaneously a sharp report followed, and the thin film of smoke blew across the air between the combatants. Charles Mannering staggered a short step or two backward, and fell to the ground.

In a moment Captain Transom had run up, and was kneeling at his side. It was a comfort to see that Charles was still living.

“Not much, I hope; how is it?”

“Hit somewhere — I don’t know — will you try to get me out of this like a good fellow?” — said Mannering, speaking very low, and with difficulty.

“Hurt, not badly, I hope?” — said Dacre, now standing close by Transom.

The French gentleman was already at the other side, and stooping over the patient — looked by no means so much put out as the other gentlemen.

Transom liked Charles Mannering very well; Charles was a very good fellow; he would take some trouble for Charles, and even ran a risk, as he had just now shown. But he had no aptitudes for nursetending — and so rigidly does every man refer things to himself, and measure them by their relations to that interesting person that Captain Transom — although half a minute had hardly passed — was already discussing with himself the best way of getting rid of so intolerable a bore without being positively ill-natured.

## CHAPTER XVII.

### DRIVE TO TOWN.

AN unexpected fourth person was added at this moment to the group.

*"Canny, now, lads — canny, now," cried a harsh voice, with a broad, Scottish intonation; and Mr. Gillespie, who had been nearer than they supposed, came up to the little group; looking grim and dismayed, — and a good deal blown from his run down a bit of the hill.*

*"Hollo! what the deil's all this — who's 'hurt? Mister Mannering, by the law! Guide us! who's been settin' ye by the lugs, ye pair of fuies!" He resumed.*

*Alfred Dacre, still unconsciously holding his smoking pistol in his hand, was looking with a frown of pain into the face of Charles Mannering. There were a great many unpleasant feelings mingled in his suspense. He knew that of men hit in duels, hardly one in twenty lost his life; and he was willing to back the chances, and stand the hazard of the die. It would be too bad if the one throw he dreaded should turn up.*

"Are ye deleerit, mon?" exclaimed the Scot, very much out of breath, with a very black look in the face of Mr. Dacre — "I thoct ye'd hae keepit your word, sir."

"I thought ye'd hae keepit your place, sir," retorted Dacre, with a bitter imitation of his broad Scotch, and so dangerous a glare in his dark eyes as showed that the insult was not meant in a spirit of fun; — "what the devil brings you here?" And he glanced up the moonlight slopes, thinking, perhaps, that some one had accompanied him, and spoke very sternly.

"Weel, I don't know," said the elder man, more quietly, "I don't know why I'm here, I'm sure, except that I'm such a gude-natured guse; and I think it's a bad business this, for I doubt ye've killed him."

"No sign of death there," muttered Dacre.

"I wish I was sure o' it; but get ye down to the carriage, and away to the toon — will ye?"

Without minding what he was saying, Dacre had addressed himself to the tall Frenchman, who was conversing affably, though nobody was listening to him. He had seen friends on the fields of battle with all sorts of gunshot wounds, and having, as a patient, once had, himself, a considerable hospital experience, was politely 'illuminating the party in voluble French, upon the case before him; and, kneeling on the turf, he felt his pulse, and pronounced that Charles Mannering would do very well, and looked, nevertheless, uneasily about, and was clearly of Mr. Gillespie's way of thinking, about the expediency of betaking themselves to the carriage which awaited them on the road hard by.

"We had better get him down to the inn — had not we?" said Dacre.

"Hout — never fash your beard about that, mon — come away, will ye — come wi' me — come I say, or ye'll sup sorrow for it."

"D — n you, be quiet, sir; I'll not go till I know how the case is."

"And d — n you for a daft loon," retorted Mr. Gillespie, savagely, muttering it, however, between his teeth, by way of soliloquy, as he turned away to another of the party.

"You'll be Mr. Thransom, I take it, sir," he said, taking that gentleman with rather a hard grip above the elbow, "I don't know, sir, how this thing fell — a quarrel may be, about a lassie — a limmer, I warrant; and I don't mean to speer any questions about it; but it wont do, sir, letting that fule Dacre stay here till some o' they constable folk clap a grip on his shoulder — it wont do, sir: and there is a doctor — Doctor Browning, they caud him, down there in the Silver Dragon. Just take your friend gently round by the road back again to the inn, de ye see, in his carriage, and ye'll tell 'em it was a mischance shootin' at a mark, or such like, wi' a pistol; and ye'll be sae gude as to drap me a line — here's my card — just to say how the fulish lad's doin', so soon as the doctor has made his examination and deeagnosis, ye comprehend; and don't keep him here, mind, on the ground a minute longer, ye may lose the doctor else, or lose the lad's life. I'm a gude-haired fule, sir, and I don't like to see young blude spilt, or mair mischief come o' it than need be; and get him awa', now, and he'll do weel, and there'll be no more fass about it, and it will all be forgot, they'll mak' it up; the dirt will rub out when its dry, and I and that French chap will try and tak' the chield Dacre away with us to toon."

There was reason in all this, though the old Scotchman spoke it in no small agitation and ire; and with their united persuasions he and the Frenchman at length induced Dacre, but not till they had got Mannering into his carriage with Transom, and seen it start for the Silver Dragon, to get into theirs and accompany them in a very rapid drive toward London.

Dacre rolled his cloak about him, and seemed disposed to take a nap in the corner, while the Frenchman was garrulous, and Mr. Gillespie sat by way of listening, glowering very surlily in his place, which was nearly opposite the dozing form of Mr. Dacre, who on a sudden laughed at some amusing recollections, it might be, and looked gaily out on the moonlighted hedgerows.

"What for do you laugh, sir?" demanded Mr. Gillespie, rather harshly.

"Never you fash your beard about that," rejoined Mr. Dacre; "isn't that the proper phrase? though what fashing a beard is, is a mystery known only to Scotchmen," he added reflectively.

"I doubt ye've killed the chield Mannering; I see naething to laugh at — *naething*," Mr. Gillespie replied with the emphasis of an oath.

"I don't want you to laugh; I don't think either the sight or sound would be agreeable. I laugh, when I'm disposed, and I don't think the chield Mannering is more likely to die of his little hurt than any one of us in this carriage. What do you think, monsieur?"

"I should not wonder," said monsieur in his own tongue, "if that young gentleman were quickly to reestablish himself. The wounds of young people in good estate cure themselves so quickly, one may see him possibly to walk himself of street in street in your so beautiful city of London before many days pass themselves."

"I don't hope it, monsieur; perhaps because I don't wish it," said Mr. Dacre. "Try one of these cigarettes. I object to his dying — I object also to his recovering more rapidly than is quite convenient."

Here Mr. Gillespie pressed his foot significantly on that of the speaker.

"One of these?" said Mr. Dacre, tendering his cigarettes.

"No, no, I thank ye, I like one o' they fellows better," and he produced a huge cigar which he prepared to smoke.

The Frenchman having a store of cigarettes in his own case kept up the fire steadily, enlivening the process by short but animated spurts of conversation.

Dacre tired first of smoking.

"The Scotch are a metaphysical people, and your brilliant nation, monsieur, are more ingenious and philosophical than we English. I was on the point of talking psychology, but I'm half afraid in such a presence."

"Monsieur may have fear of Monsieur Gillespie, perhaps, but of me it is impossible; I should listen, I assure monsieur, with more of pleasure and instruction than I can express to his charming discourses."

"You do me too much honour, monsieur, you tempt me to try; and as you are a man of *politesse auprès des dames*, like my friend Monsieur Gillespie — —"

Here was an impatient grunt from the Scotchman.

"Suppose we talk of that inexhaustible mystery, the *beau sexe*, monsieur — that most charming of Nature's enigmas."

"I wonder whether that chap's dead yet," interrupted Mr. Gillespie, with savage impatience.

"What chap?" inquired Dacre.

"The chap ye've maist murdered," answered the Scot.

"Now, come, we advised one another not to fash our beards, didn't we? and that's a disagreeable subject," said Dacre. "He's not dead — he's not going to die; we have my excellent friend, Monsieur Droqueville's word for that; haven't we, monsieur?"

"Yes, monsieur, I am well assured; I have had some experience, and I am extremely happy that I dare to pronounce an opinion favourable to the young gentleman who suffers under a stroke of pistol — (how you say?) — an accident so unfortunate; the lead is placed in the most desirable way for that young gentleman. I have taken the liberty to look under his waistcoat, and I know precisely, for I have seen at different times three persons wounded in the same place, which, if you permit, I will explain."

"On no account, monsieur," replied Dacre with prompt politeness. "I quite assent to the conclusion, and the reasons might only unsettle our convictions. You now hear, Monsieur Gillespie, what my gallant friend Colonel Droqueville says upon that subject, and I hope you don't mean to contradict him."

"I don't suppose the colonel is a doctor," said Mr. Gillespie sourly, "they're two very different trades, sir, asking your pardon, colonel; the colonel has a gude opinion how best to drive a bullet into your body, but it's not his business to get it out again, nor to tell you what it's like to do for you while it is there."

"Well, I'll not be bored any more about him," said Dacre sharply; "I really thought I was rid of that subject for tonight at least, and I'd be glad to know how one is to get rid of a bore if shooting him wont do?"

"I doubt it may do for him and you both," said Mr. Gillespie angrily.

"I've told you before I don't mean to talk about him," said Dacre with an odd laugh, "and you shan't; I don't care a farthing who I quarrel with tonight — I'm quite in that vein."

"It's well, mayhap, for some folk I'm never in that vein," retorted Mr. Gillespie, with an angry sneer. "It's a game that two must play at, if it's played at all; and ye ken verra weel, sir, ye hae nae such fule to deal wi' in me, Mr. Dacre."

"Fool? Certainly, in some respects he's no fool," said Dacre, contemplatively. "I'll tell you, however, if you intend croaking any more, that I shall take it as meaning that it is better you should be quite free to turn back and see the patient, and I shall set you down. I mean to return to town, and you can walk back to the Silver Dragon and help to nurse Mr. Mannering. It will be very goodnatured, but I'm hanged if I endure any more talk about him in this carriage."

Mr. Dacre was talking with an excitement that was very like the menacing jocularity of a quarrelsome man who has been drinking; wine, however, had nothing to do with it, and the odd state of his temper and spirits arose, I suppose, from the transactions of the evening and his nervous suspense about Mannering."

"Daft," muttered Gillespie; "he's lost his wits," and turning away with an angry sniff he assumed that he had asserted himself, at least as much as was expedient.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### PISTOLS AND GENTLEMEN COME HOME.

"I was going to say, monsieur, when Mr. Gillespie was so good as to amuse us with another subject, that I should like very much to know exactly why I ever did anything in all my life — even this little affair in which you were so good as to lend me, as you once did before in another part of the world, your counsel and support, and become my right arm. I feel like a man who has waked from a dream. I wonder why I cared to take any step in the matter, and I am disposed to ask your pardon, monsieur, for having given you so much trouble." Monsieur assured his friend Mr. Dacre, that there was no trouble, and that he was infinitely charmed of having been able to render his service.

"Monsieur is a philanthropist, and says so to satisfy my self-reproach. Was ever known moonlight so fortunate! how brilliant! no image fresh from the chisel ever showed sharper than the young gentleman who is comfortably in his bed, I hope, by this time; but you observed, no doubt, the distance seemed greater than it was; the illusion, however, did not avail. May I try one of your cigarettes, monsieur, they perfume so deliciously."

So, for a time they all three smoked together in silence, and the atmosphere of the interior grew hazy. One cigarette satisfied Mr. Dacre this time, and that light quickly burns out. He leaned back for a little, then out of the window. "London! What a hell London really is, and how I like it," mused Mr. Dacre, who was feverish and fidgety, and could endure nothing long that evening.

"We devils, Mr. Gillespie, have our affinities — our paradise is in the infernal," continued Dacre.

"I don't believe in devils nor paradise neither, except a fule's paradise, and very densely populated, I warrant you," sneered Mr. Gillespie.

"Very densely, sir, and I take the Fleet prison to be one of its suburbs, where a lot of fools are locked up for spending the money of other fools, who grin and swear at them through the bars."

"And who do you allude to, sir?" demanded Mr. Gillespie, angrily.

"Well, one of the inhabitants of that paradise is a friend of ours; I visit him now and then, perhaps you're aware, and so do you; but he owes me no money, and, therefore, I don't look foolish when I see him."

Mr. Gillespie did not like that joke at all, and muttering so as not to be audible, however — "Ye'll look foolish enough one day, my fine fellow, if ye let your tongue wag as ye're doing."

He turned away, and settled in his corner and resumed his cheroot vigorously.

"Green — green — green," murmured Mr. Dacre enigmatically, as he looked out of the carriage window; "tiresome thing green is; paradise — simplicity — verdure — moonshine; yes, I like the other world better; yellow stucco — red brick — gas light — and d — d clever fellows — devils. The angelic life is insupportable insipidity."

And with a sigh and a shrug he threw himself back in his seat, and his discourse went rambling on.

"I wish I were altogether a devil; I'm perplexed and made inefficient by stupid yearnings after Eden; a divided being is self-torture, not a grain of conscience or *all* conscience, — anything between is loss of force and deep-seated incurable pain."

Mr. Dacre was so obviously rhodomontading in soliloquy, and the noise of the carriage broke the continuity of hearing so effectually that the politeness of Monsieur Droqueville suffered no violence in his quiet attention to the flavour of his cigarette, which precluded any attempt to convert his comrade's reverie into a colloquy.

Mr. Dacre repeated to himself some well-known verses thus: —

"That proud dame, for whom his soul  
Was burnt within him to a coal,  
Used him so like a base rascallion,  
That old Pyg (what d'ye call him) *Malion*,  
That cut his mistress out of stone,  
Had not so hard a hearted one."

Mr. Dacre smiled in his meditation.

"Yes," continued he, "they are very odd cats. It is a great pity that philosophy has not weighed, measured, and analysed them. We talk of human nature, and we mean *men's* nature; feminine human nature — a thing by itself — has never been analysed by grave psychologists; we leave it to be dogmatized on by the frivolous and the libertine, a study on which a metaphysician might easily go mad. Mad!" he repeated, "I sometimes think I am."

And then this volatile young gentleman began to hum an air from an opera.

"It is the nature of the lioness," he suddenly resumed, returning from music to metaphysics; "an instinct for picking out the grandest mate, whether they like him or not, and so with a vainglory strangely humble, to make him their boast, and their sex's envy their happiness. Yes, mesdemoiselles, if the lioness is not satisfied with her suitor, when they take their moonlight walk together in the jungle, she roars and roars, despite the uneasiness of her lover, till from a distant jungle comes an answering roar, and nearer, and nearer, and nearer, and so a battle — and she secures the benefit of competition and the finer animal for a mate; and what, young ladies, is your courtesy at St. James's — your coming out and all that? Is it not your way of roaring and inviting from all circumjacent jungles those lions whom it may concern?"

Now came another silence, during which Mr. Dacre amused himself by gazing, with his head out at the window, upon the landscape, all shrouded in the snowy moonlight. It did not induce serenity, however, so he thought he would try tobacco again.

"May I light this at yours? a thousand thanks, monsieur."

And so, another cigarette, and then Dacre returned to his reverie.

"Of course, there are conditions. You must not be corpulent and bald, and covered with snuff; you must not be aged, white-headed and cross; you must not be fifty things that are obvious, but these excepted, you may almost anything provided you are distinguished and run after; women like fame; they worship masculine renown more than men do. Then what is a poor devil to do who can't declare his fame, such as it is?"

Mr. Dacre spoke this in a disjointed way; blowing out films of perfumed smoke in the intervals, and with the last sentence he threw the end of his cigarette out of the window and laughed sarcastically.

"And, yet, the moonlight is very pretty," he said, as he looked out again, once more passing to a new theme. "As good, very nearly, as anything they make in her Majesty's Theatre, for those happy fellows Don Giovanni or Don anything else. It sometimes makes a fellow almost spoony."

"Ah! yes; the moon — the moon — the lamp of the lovers, I never see it without to feel some sentiment what you call romantic — eh!" said monsieur, leaning forward and smiling, and shrugging upward plaintively, and then a sigh. "Ah!"

"Come, monsieur, our emotions musn't overcome us."

"N' atteste point sa lumière infidèle!" Monsieur shrugged, smiled, and sighed again.

"AH! Monsieur," replied Droqueville, "there are so many tender recollections and ideas. This is so beautiful moon, and — what you call? — *paysage* — *ces bois* — all these things recall so many circumstances of tender regret. These pistols, they do not to incommode your feet, I hope?" inquired Monsieur, as Dacre's foot knocked on the case which they had so lately used.

"Many thanks no, Monsieur, I can quite understand you —

"Dans ces bois, Lise en vain me jure

Qu'elle m'aimera constamment;

O Bonheur! ta douce imposture

N'est que le rêve d'un moment;

Et, comme aux loix du changement

Tout est soumis dans la nature,

Ces bois changeront de verdure,

Et Lise changera d'amant."

"EH! Monsieur, is not that very like it? however, let us dry our eyes and try another cigar."

So saying he offered his case, and monsieur with suitable acknowledgments accepted one, and offered his in return with a very animated description of its peculiarities and flavor, and so politely Mr. Dacre relieved himself of dialogue, and that cigar ended, broke again into rambling soliloquy.

"A very good plan is to make yourself a little bit mysterious, to pique curiosity — mother Eve fell by it; to make a confidence — a secret known only to you two — an excuse for whispers — a germ of sympathy — to undertake a service — danger, if by any means it can be had; and so always in her thoughts — always there; very dangerous, young ladies, is not it? Danger, ay, action and reaction; take care, Mr. Gillespie, 'when you try that experiment, you don't run into some little danger yourself.'"

Mr. Gillespie uttered a grunt of contempt, shook the ashes from his cigar and smoked on.

"Excite their curiosity, their romance, penetrate feelings akin to gratitude, and inspire admiration by self-devotion. Is not that a gas lamp?"

Mr. Gillespie nodded gruffly.

"Old London town again, Monsieur Droqueville, how can I thank you?" said Dacre.

"By not to say one word of an obligation which is altogether mine; I have to thank Monsieur very much for the distinction of having been selected for a post so confidential."

"Where shall we set you down, sir?" asked Mr. Gillespie of the Frenchman.

He named his hotel.

"I wish, dear Droqueville, I could offer you any hospitality; but I am, as you know, a mere bird of passage here; and—"

"A thousand thanks; say not one word; I am going for half-an-hour to look into the theatre near this, where my compatriots play of vaudevilles; and Monsieur Gillespie, how shall we know how Monsieur Mannering recovers?"

"What for, do you want to know, sir?" answered Mr. Gillespie.

"It affects in some measure, sir, my safety, because I have taken part in the affair of this evening, and I should be compromised were Monsieur Mannering's indisposition, by misfortune, to end unhappily."

"A pretty hot kettle-o'-fish for us all, sir; I wish he may be spared, sir. I thought ye were confident on that head, sir — ye spoke as if ye were. I don't understand, sir. I don't know why ye should say all ye did if ye thought he was like to die, sir."

"But Monsieur is not a prophet, nor even a doctor," said Dacre.

"Well, I call ye both to witness I had neither act nor part in it; it is yer ain affair, gentlemen, I wash my hands o't."

"I hope they wont hang you by mistake, Mr. Gillespie, it would be a very melancholy end for so cautions a gentleman," said Dacre.

"I'll take care they shan't, sir; deevlish gude care, sir," replied Mr. Gillespie.

"AND in the interval you must make out how he is doing?" said Dacre.

"I'll hear that; I tauld them to let me know, though, except for gude-nature's sake, there's nae need I should care the snap or my finger whether the fule lives or dees."

"Well, monsieur, Mr. Gillespie will do himself the honour to let you know punctually how Mr. Mannering does, and I'll let you know also," said Dacre.

Monsieur Droqueville was profuse in his acknowledgments.

A little out of their way they had to go, to knock up the honest gunsmith of whom Mr. Dacre had hired the pistols for a shooting match, for a wager of twenty pounds, as that circumstantial teller of a story informed him. Then they dropped Monsieur Droqueville at his hotel.



## CHAPTER XIX.

### MR. DACRE TAKES THE COMMAND.

THE driver came to the window.

"Where do you want to go?" asked Mr. Gillespie of his companion, with a surly and threatening countenance.

"To hell," said that gentleman, whose gayer levity seemed to have broken down altogether on the departure of their companion.

"Time enough, sir, for that; I'll tell him to drive to my door."

"The nearest entrance to the place I spoke of," said the young man with a dreary scoff.

Mr. Gillespie gave the man his order, and as soon as they were in motion, being himself in no pleasant temper, he said —

"Mr. — a — a — Dacre, yer no' that deevil the night, sir."

"As *ceevil* as I wish to be," said Dacre. "Verra unceevil, sir, and what's more, deevilish imprudent, sir; where's the gude in talkin' in that violent, daft fashion before people? Why, any fule would see ye were in a commotion o' mind, sir; that fellow that's driving us, he'll never believe it was an accident; he'll smell a rat, Mr. Dacre; he'll be conjecturing and talking, sir."

"And suspect you," said Dacre.

"Nothing o' the kind, sir; but I tell ye, Mr. Dacre, you had no business engaging in a thing o' that sort, no business in life, sir; ye tauld me ye wanted to concealate the young blockhead, when, in point o' fact, sir, ye only wanted to shoot him."

"We've had a charming day," said Dacre. "And a bludey evening," added Gillespie. "Yes, a bloody evening. Now, see, Mr. Gillespie, you are a clever man in your way, a clever usurer — don't mind the phrase — and you've made a fortune; but you'll leave the management of this affair to me; you don't comprehend such mechanism; nothing is done without a reason, not the least perfect move has been the occurrence of this evening, which seems to have frightened you half out of your wits."

"Well, if he dies, I conjecture ye'll be probably hanged, and a verro perfect move — out o' the world — it will prove; and I'd like to know, in that case' what's been gained by it; or even if 'twere no more than two years' imprisonment, I think it will be quite enough to knock your chances pretty well on the head. I didn't think ye capable, Mr. Dacre, of anything so eediotic."

Dacre smiled.

"Ye may laugh as ye will, Mr. Dacre; ye may laugh now, but ye'll think shame o' yourself, when ye come to reflect, how ye've put everything in jeopardy, and other people besides yourself — and — and a'maist ruined all, sir, by this one night's wark."

Again the young gentleman smiled. It was not a pleasant smile; his face was pale, and he looked as tired as if he had walked fifty miles fasting; and the smile was but momentary — nothing enjoying in the light that darkened so instantaneously into apathy.

"I did not think ye were one o' those ranting fellows. What for should ye go to put yerself on a footing with these bleezing braggarts? Why, sir, if ye chanced to shoot him dead on the spot, it would ha' been worse, a'maist, than if he had killed you."

"You take a great interest in my safety, Mr. Gillespie," said the young man, and smiled again.

"Tak' an interest in your life, sir, and an interest in your prospects; ye're a clever young man, sir — ye're a clever young man, Mr. Dacre, but this night's work — I'm clean bombazed wi' it. Gad, sir, not a soul of us can tell how it will end; and I begin to think if you're a madman, I'm a fule, the greater madman o' the two, for trusting you; and I don't know why we shouldn't, t'ane and t'other, be locked up in Bedlam, instead o' being treated like sane men."

Dacre yawned.

"I see ye're cast down about it yourself," said Mr. Gillespie.

"By Jove, I'm no such thing — very much the contrary; I brought it about with great tact and patience, and I would not have it undone for a thousand pounds. If there is any annoyance, it is something entirely different, and I mean to keep it to myself."

"If you like what you've done, you're easily pleased, sir," sneered Mr. Gillespie.

"I'm not easily pleased, and I do like it. Of course there's one blot — if he dies — but that wont happen, and I thank God, I shot him."

"I'm glad ye're so releegious, sir, and I wish I could be as easy about it as you are; and think o't how ye will, I consider it a breach o' faith wi' me, sir, and a d — d piece of nonsense beside."

Mr. Dacre yawned again.

"And a fine business it will be, sir, if all goes to the wall for this mad, lawless freak of yours," added Mr. Gillespie, with increasing energy.

"Do mind your own business," said Mr. Dacre, dryly; "if you choose to back my game, sir, you take me as I am — skill, judgment, everything; and rather than be bored any more with your stupid grumbling, I'd throw my cards in your face."

Mr. Dacre spoke with a sudden exasperation that had its evident effect upon Mr. Gillespie.

"See, there: what a pother about nothing; why — a — Mr. — Mr. — a — Dacre, sir, it's more for your own sake than for mine, sir; of course we should both be injured, but you, Mr. Dacre, preencipally, 'twould touch you, may be, verro nearly, sir; and a' things conseedered, I think I may venture to put in a word now and again when I see a necessity; but ye'll understand, I'm verro far, sir, from meaning any offence, or wishing ye to suppose that I'm deesatisfied generally with the line ye have adopted, on the contrary, I'm verro weel pleased with it, and we'll hope all may end well."

Dacre had lighted a new cigarette on finishing his own speech, and was looking out of window, and smoking, as it seemed, without hearing one word of Mr. Gillespie's complimentary address.

So silence succeeded until the carriage drew up at Mr. Gillespie's hall-door steps.

"It's four minutes past eleven, sir; ye'll do weel, Mr. Dacre, to come in; Mr. Larkin and Mr. Levi will be within, sir. I can't offer you any refreshment, but we can talk a bit, and conseeder what's best to be done in the emergency."

"No refreshments! how can you say so, with two such men as Mr. Larkin and Mr. Levi to charm us; d — n you, sir, do you take me for a fool, in right earnest, to suppose that I should go in here, to spend what remains of the night with two such arrant villains."

"Arrant villains! guide us! that's a very pointed expression, Mr. Dacre. Well, sir, they may be clever men, I'll no deny they're clever men, but as to villains, sir, they lead most regular lives, enough, sir; none o' yer ranting fules, wasting their substance on nonsense; they don't drink, sir, nor any o' them vices, to signify; and they don't play, sir — none o' them follies, Mr. Dacre. No; they never play, except Mr. Levi, and that only when he stands sure to win. Oh, no sir, I can't allow THAT, unless all morality is confounded, sir, and that I'm to say I'm a villain myself. There's a line to be drawn somewhere, Mr. Dacre, and ye'll find those gentlemen at the right side o' it; they're clever, sir, but such language as that ye've applied to them, Mr. Dacre, is verra loose."

Mr. Dacre made no answer; he leaned back in the carriage as if he meant to pass the night in it.

"Open the door," said Mr. Gillespie to the driver, which order was obeyed, and he waited some seconds, but Mr. Dacre made no sign, and evidently was not getting out.

"We'll get down now, Mr. Dacre, if ye please; the hall door's open," said Gillespie, with cautious civility.

"I shan't get out, thanks."

"Wont ye come in and talk with the gentlemen, sir?" urged Mr. Gillespie.

"No," answered Dacre.

"Why — why — Mr. Dacre, sir? they're here at your desire," insisted the grim old gentleman, who was a great deal angrier than he cared to make known.

"They may go away at their own desire, sir," said Dacre, carelessly.

"Well, sir, ye'll do as ye think fit; but they'll hardly think it a usual way o' doing business," said Mr. Gillespie.

"A man's real business in life is to do what he likes best," said Dacre.

"Do let me persuade you, Mr. Dacre?"

"No."

"Well, and what will ye have them do?" demanded the old gentleman, commanding his temper with difficulty, in deference to Dacre's odd mood.

"Nothing," answered that impracticable young gentleman.

"Then I'm to tell them ye'll have them do nothing?"

"Yes, I'll let them wait; yes, Mr. Gillespie, there are limits to goodnature; I'm willing to be of use to you, but I'll not worry myself a bit more than, is necessary; and now, listen. You shall let me know; at least twice a day exactly, how that pompous fellow, Mannering, is getting on; if you fail, you'll find me unmanageable. You'll go down there yourself in the morning. I need not tell you that you're not to mention a word about me, nor to pretend that you know where I am. All the better if you give him a hint that I've gone to France with Droqueville; but I leave that to your own invention."

"I'm scarce out o' the doctor's hands, Mr. Dacre; the gout's not well out o' my knuckles yet. I'll be none the better o' this piece o' nonsense, and I'll hardly undertake to be jogging out to that d — d Silver Dragon again tomorrow morning."

"Mr. Gillespie, you MUST do as I say; you'll find I'm in earnest."

"I'd better send up word to the gentlemen," said Mr. Gillespie, beckoning to the maid, who stood at the door.

"Drive away," shouted Dacre.

"Where, sir?" inquired the driver.

"Anywhere — toward the West-end," cried Dacre.

"Give my compliments to the gentlemen upstairs," shouted Gillespie, from the other window, to the servant at the doorsteps; "and mind, ye tell them—"

But before he got further, distance made him inaudible; it was very trying to a gouty man.

## CHAPTER XX.

### NEWS FROM THE SILVER DRAGON.

“*HERE comes Mr. Dacre. Come in; don't stand in the door, smiling, like an apparition,*” cried Mrs. Wardell, next evening, very glad to see that familiar face again at Guildford House.

“*Like an apparition, I waited to be spoken to.*”

“*Well, come in — do come in,*” said Mrs. Wardell.

“*Yes, that completes it. I enter like that apparition. Who was he — I forget — who stood at the door, and was told to enter?*”

“*Mephistopheles,*” said a voice.

“*Oh, thanks, Miss Gray. I'm flattered, though you may not have meant a compliment. I rather like that fiend; better, I'm afraid, than you do.*”

Miss Gray laughed a little as they shook hands.

“I had not an idea, Miss Gray, that you were in the room; that vase and those flowers hid you so completely. Yes, I think I do recollect Mephistopheles at Faust's study door, waiting at the threshold; but — but I hope you don't think me VERY like that unseasonable visitor?”

“Mysterious — satirical; yes, what more? “Well, really I can't say.”

“You laugh very unkindly.”

“That's very true; for if you knew what has occurred, you would think it very unkind of me to laugh.”

“Yes, indeed,” supplemented Mrs. Wardell; “we have been so sorry and uneasy; you can't think—”

“Really? What can it be — what is it?” said Dacre.

“News — very unpleasant — of my cousin, Charles Mannering. He has been hurt — rather seriously from all I can learn — and we are very uncomfortable about him.”

“Very sorry, indeed. Wasn't that Mr.

Mannering whom I met here the other evening?”

“Yes, the evening before last,” said Laura.

“And what's the matter?”

“Bather a bad fall from his horse, I'm afraid,” said Challys Gray.

“I once saw such a frightful accident,” said good Mrs. Wardell, placing her fat hand before her eyes with a shudder; “a poor young man (a Captain Paulet) actually killed, so horribly, at a steeplechase. I never went to see one again, and I never shall.”

“But, it's nothing so serious as to alarm, is it?” inquired Mr. Dacre.

“There was a note written at his dictation, by a Captain Transom, and signed with very tremulous initials by poor Charles; he made nothing of it, but it somehow frightened us. Didn't it, Julia?”

“Very much,” said Mrs. Wardell; “there are always such concealments about such things; they are afraid, to tell.”

“And how do you know,” asked Mr.

Dacre, “how it occurred? Biding you say?”

“Yes, he says so himself. Have you got the note about you, Julia?”

“Yes, here it is.”

“Head what he says, like a darling.”

She obeyed, and read as follows: —

“I am in a quiet little roadside inn, very comfortable. Biding here yesterday I had an ugly fall, and must keep quiet for a few days. My friend, Captain Transom, kindly acts as my amanuensis. I drop a line by post lest you should think me remiss. Pray keep a note of any commissions that can wait for a week or so, and when I am fit for duty once more, I will discharge the arrear. If you should see Ardenbroke, though that is not likely in so short a time, or any other friend, pray don't mention this. It is really nothing — only a little uncomfortable; and some of my friends might come down here bothering me.”

“Where IS he?” asked Dacre.

“He writes at the top ‘The Silver Dragon,’ and the post town,” said Laura.

“Oh, the Silver Dragon; really?” and Mr. Dacre smiled a little oddly.

“Not a gambling house, I hope,” exclaimed Mrs. Wardell.

“Well, they have what they call skittles there, and quoits, and bowling, and that kind of low gaming. No one goes there, or if one did, it would be for a lark; and I suppose our sober friend went there. He did not ride down at all; he drove. A friend of mine saw him going down with a Captain Transom. Depend upon it he got into a row, and some one gave him a very hard hit. A quiet little roadside inn! You have no idea how amusing that is. But, after all, what is a poor fellow to do who gets into a ridiculous scrape? I never tell an untruth myself, because I happen to hate it, having suffered from other people's contempt of truth; but poor Mr. Mannering — here he laughed pleasantly — “of course he has coloured the affair a little.”

“Charles used to tell the truth,” said Laura.

“I dare say; I'm sure Mr. Mannering is quite a champion of truth in Miss Laura Gray's presence. But we young fellows are sadly given to lying. I should lie myself were it not that other people's mendacity has disgusted me with the practice for my life. But I'm not hard upon poor fellows who have not contracted the same antipathy, and who speak the language of their kind.”

“That's very good of you,” said Mrs. Wardell; “you are a very goodnatured moralist.

“Is not secrecy something of the nature of falsehood?” asked Miss Gray; perhaps she meant to show Mr. Dacre that he had something to excuse in himself.

"Silence is not falsehood, Miss Gray, and, on the contrary, is sometimes the very highest loyalty," said Mr. Dacre, sadly. "Concealment is not disguise."

"But to return to poor Charles Mannering; you heard of him to-day?" asked Miss Gray.

"Yes; a friend mentioned him to-day, and had been down to the Silver Dragon this morning to make inquiries, and it is quite true that he is hurt."

"Not seriously, I hope," inquired she, alarmed.

"Nothing of any consequence?" cried Mrs. Wardell at the same moment.

"Very trifling. My friend is slightly acquainted with him, and having heard that he was hurt, went down this morning to ask after him. He may have to stay there for a fortnight; but he said there is nothing to make one the least uneasy."

"But what is it?"

"You really must tell us," urged both ladies at once.

"Why do you suppose that I know anything more?" inquired Mr. Dacre.

"Because you do?" answered Mrs. Wardell, relying on intuition.

"I can't answer that, so I had better confess, particularly as Miss Gray condemns reserve so decidedly. You are quite right, Mrs. Wardell; I am informed of the entire affair. Mr. Mannering had been behaving a little oddly — very unlike himself; had been listening to stories and circulating them, it seems, about another young man, who met him there, and gave him rather a rough lesson; and the fall from his horse — horse he had none — turns out to have been a very hard knock of quite another kind."

"But not dangerous?" inquired Miss Gray, after a moment's pause.

"Not the least, my friend says, if he'll only keep quiet — nothing — and the whole affair is supremely ridiculous."

"Well, it is very provoking, poor fellow!" exclaimed Mrs. Wardell; "and how soon shall we see him?"

"In a fortnight," said Dacre.

"That's a long time. Dear me, it must have been a very severe hurt," said Mrs. Wardell.

"The doctors regard it as a mere nothing, my informant tells me."

"Was he stabbed, or how was it?" inquired Julia Wardell, very uneasy.

"Yes; do say how it was," urged Miss Gray.

"I believe I ought not to tell," he answered.

"I'm sure you'll tell us," she said.

"I'm sure I ought not to tell, Miss Gray; but the truth is I find it quite impossible to disobey you. See what a responsibility you charge yourself with in taking the command of a fellow-creature. Well, I ask but one condition; it is a secret. People might be seriously compromised if by any accident it got abroad."

"We'll not tell; we won't tell, Julia? Certainly not."

"No, not for the world," echoed the old lady.

"I don't think I ought," he said, coming over to Miss Gray; "I'm sure I oughtn't; but," and he lowered his voice, "you command, and you are absolute."

"You must not lower your voice, Mr. Dacre," said Mrs. Wardell; "I'm to hear it, all about it, as well as Laura. You must tell us how it was, and what he was hurt with."

"With a pistol bullet," replied Dacre.

"Oh, dear! how horrid!" exclaimed Miss Gray, very pale in a moment.

"Oh, mercy!" exclaimed Mrs. Wardell, "a pistol! then there has been a duel?"

"You are quite right — a duel; and from all I can learn," said Dacre, who did not quite like the signs of alarm, transient as they were, that showed themselves in Laura's face. "I hope Miss Gray will excuse my saying anything not quite in her kinsman's favour — I'm afraid it was very much Mr. Mannering's fault — altogether, indeed."

"I thought people never fought duels now," said Miss Gray.

"In extreme cases, extreme fools do still," said Dacre; "and from all I can hear, Mr. Mannering had left himself very open. There is a man against whom, it appears, he cherishes an unfriendly feeling, and he is said to have been hunting up gossip and old stories to his prejudice; watching his movements, and talking about him in a way that no one pretending to be a gentleman could bear. I'm telling you now what I have heard. His hurt, I'm told, has turned out to be nothing, and so he lies by for a fortnight and meditates, and his little experience may be the means of keeping him out of a much worse scrape."

"And -who is the person he quarrelled with," inquired Miss Gray.

"Well, that I really can't tell," said Mr. Dacre. "I don't mean to say I don't know; but I should break faith with two or three people if I were to whisper it anywhere."

Laura Challys Gray looked in his eyes inquiringly, and then down, with a little frown, in deep meditation.

"Are you sure it's nothing very bad?" inquired Mrs. Wardell, with new anxiety.

"Perfectly certain; I happened, as I told you, this afternoon, to meet a man who had just returned from a visit to his quarters in the country; he had seen him, and saw his doctor and Mr. Transom, also; and I went into particulars, thinking that if you had heard anything of the affair, it would be pleasant to you to hear also that the consequences were really so trifling."

"Very kind of you," said Mrs. Wardell.

"The only thing the doctor is really peremptory about, is that he shall see nobody; he was quite angry with my friend when he found him there. So I would venture to recommend that you should send no one there; he would be sure to have your messenger up to his room and talk; but simply let him have a line by the post, and he can employ his secretary."

"Yes, so he can, without tiring himself," acquiesced the old lady.

"And, I'm afraid my news has been rather a damper, I'm so sorry. But you may rely entirely upon my bulletin; and if you wish it, I'll make a point of seeing the same person every day, for he told me he meant to send or go down to that place every afternoon, and you shall hear exactly what he tells me."

"That's very kind of you," said Mrs. Wardell, "though I think the undertaking was addressed to Laura Gray."

“And, Miss Gray, may I sing a song for you, and try to steal you away from your anxieties?”

Laura laughed.

“I’m not anxious now, although I should be if poor Charlie were in any danger. Of course I was a little shocked when I heard he had been actually engaged in a duel, but as it has ended so harmlessly, I should like very much indeed to hear a song.”

Dacre smiled darkly on this beautiful girl for a moment, as if he was grateful for being permitted to obey her.

“What shall it be?”

“Anything.”

He went to the piano, humming softly to himself, as singers will do, in aid of memory — sat down, and sang more divinely than ever.

## CHAPTER XXI.

### GOOD NIGHT.

Young ladies, is there anything so dangerous as such a tenor, when the singer, especially, is so marvellously handsome as Alfred Dacre was? to such a voice it is given to awake those wild and tender feelings which mingle in all romance, in love, in sorrow, and in the yearnings of hope, and by a process so mysterious to steal into the heart, and open the fountain of our tears. Laura Gray sat near the window, looking out, and the enchantment of the music remained after it ceased, and she listened still, as it were, to the remembrance of it.

"I'm afraid! sang to inattentive ears," said he, very low; he had come to the window, and, leaning on the sash, spoke, looking down upon her, she thought, with a sad smile.

"Mr. Dacre," she said, "I am so much obliged; it was beautiful!"

She looked up smiling, with a dilated eye and pale cheek. What so delightfully flatters the vanity of man as seeing such evidences of emotion elicited by himself in a face so young and lovely.

Dacre smiled, he even laughed, and his small even teeth glimmered, and his dark eyes seemed to burn with a triumph almost insulting.

"The pride of this moment, Miss Gray, I shall never forget," he almost whispered; and in the fervour of his words a deep soft crimson dyed her cheeks, her eyes dropped for a moment, but she quickly recovered herself.

"Pride? Why should there be such a feeling? all good music affects all people who have ears to hear, in like manner."

"You won't understand me," he said smiling, with a little shake of the head, and in a sad tone.

"I do; your words are quite clear, and that is my commentary."

"Do you believe in possession, Miss Gray?"

"A very cheerful question, Mr. Dacre."

"But do you?" he urged.

"Of course I believe it, and so must you, for it's in the Bible."

I don't know that Mr. Dacre quite admitted that logic. He was too well-bred, however, to dispute the authority to which Miss Gray bowed.

"Double identities, and all that," he resumed. "When you mean and don't mean — when you are quite in earnest, yet ridicule your own earnestness — when you admire and yet despise yourself — and perhaps love and also hate some other person."

"I have never been in that delightful state of confusion," says Miss Gray, with a laugh.

"I wish we were all as single-minded," he said. "As for me, I am sometimes legion — ever so many spirits in the same person! Don't you think it a very dangerous state: a mutinous crew — the captain deposed — who can tell which among them will prove the more potent spirit, and what course the ship will steer; which reminds me that my course lies homeward now — two men on business that may interest you, to meet me; my hour has come." All this was nearly in a whisper, and just at this moment a servant came in to announce to Mrs. Wardell the alarming intelligence respecting her dog who had been an invalid for two days — that Mrs. Medlicot thought there was something queer about his head and his left paw, and a sort of a shaking she did not understand.

"My dear, do you hear that?" she exclaimed, fussing up from her chair. "I knew, and no one would believe me, that it was serious. I knew it from the first," and Mrs. Wardell got out of the room faster than she had moved for a week.

"Mr. Dacre, I have to ask one thing," said Laura. "Do you think what has happened to Charles Mannering is in any way connected with our pursuit of the odious people who wrote those letters?"

Mr. Dacre smiled.

"That question is an inspiration," he said. "Yes, I not only think, but I know, with absolute certainty, that what has occurred to Mr. Mannering is directly connected with those villanous machinations — how, I shall explain hereafter — I cannot do so now; but there is a mutual dependence between them of the most intimate kind, and, having said so much, I must there stop short for the present. Good night, Miss Gray."

"No, don't go, pray, for one moment. Do tell me how it is connected."

"That affair is the most intricate in the world. Ask me nothing for the present. You shall know everything by-and-by. I may tell you this, however, Mr. Mannering has been unconsciously committing the most serious stupidities. He was entangling himself in influences which he no more sees, and cannot, than those operations of nature, which, work, like the electric fluid, in secret, but which it is dangerous, and may be death itself, to encounter."

"Now — yes — that is precisely what I have been thinking. I shall leave this place tomorrow. I am involving others by remaining here, and I have no right, no claim, Mr. Dacre, to expose you any longer to the dangers which your kindness and generosity prompt you to incur for my sake."

Miss Laura Gray had risen with a look so high and spirited, that she might have represented a more beautiful Charlotte Corday in the moment of inspiration.

He looked at her with a smile of undisguised admiration.

"It is now my turn to entreat," said he. "If you withdraw before the crisis of the odious conspiracy which is directed against you, annoyance will pursue you wherever you go. I pledge myself within a week to place these villains on their knees and to extort a distinct confession of their guilt if only you remain where you are. If you, on the contrary, leave this place, you will by so doing involve me in very serious danger, and yourself in protracted anxieties and alarms. If you think I have any claim on your consideration, I implore of you to prove it as I say."

"You say within a week, Mr. Dacre. You must in that case act with precipitation, and I don't know what danger such haste may involve. Your life has been in danger; Charles has also been in danger. I don't know what to think. I should much prefer incurring such annoyances as you apprehend for me, to risking the safety of kind friends who have been exerting themselves so generously, and I wont. I have quite made up my mind I will not; and Mr. Gryston can find a messenger to bring those papers I have to sign, or come himself, for here I will stay no longer."

"But, I assure you—"

"No; I've made up my mind. I should never forgive myself if I were to allow this to continue. I don't understand such people — they are so desperately wicked; but it's plain that if I remain here others may suffer."

"There has been too much anxiety and danger already."

Mr. Dacre smiled, and his dark eyes seemed to gleam almost fiercely on her.

"Miss Gray, you overrate the danger — I despise it; but as that argument wont prevail, let me urge another. I implore of you to believe this; — if you go just now you will involve me and perhaps others in very serious and urgent danger, and you will place me besides in a position the most painful that can be imagined. Only remain a very little longer and you will have ceased to have any disagreeable motive for going. Have I prevailed?"

"You, Mr. Dacre, are better entitled than any other person to advise me in this miserable business — you have taken more trouble. I will try a little longer as you think so, and we will see what a week may bring."

"I am very grateful," said Dacre.

"No; it is I who should thank you, but I wont go on saying that. We should only have to repeat our pretty sayings over and over, and mine is true."

"Your commands I obey, and now, more than ever grateful, I say goodnight."

"Goodnight," said she.

In another minute he was driving away under the old trees. His odd, half-bitter smile had subsided. He looked back at the drawingroom window in which the light was shining. He wished to see her there, even her shadow; but a bough of a great tree hid the window, and he leaned back and said —

"Yes; it is a deep game, or — a VERY shallow one. This mechanism then is wound up — springs, wheels, levers — rather a nice piece of work. It must run on and down, and play its figures and strike the hours. By Heaven, I haven't thought for days; I never think now — my head swims and whirls so pleasantly. I hear, I see, I enjoy, but I never think. What a pretty creature she is — the prettiest creature in the world. It is a great pity."

## CHAPTER XXII.

### IN PRISON.

In his dingy room, de Beaumirail looked ill and peevish. He had jerked away his novel, which lay sprawling, open leaved, upon the floor. The novelist had ventured, with a pompous emphasis, some moral platitudes which grated on the nerves of the recluse. "Conceited little Pharisee! And his book is as stupid as—" there was, of course, a simile. "what's this?"

Good old Mr. Parker, the clergyman, had forgotten, on making his last visit, that oldfashioned duodecimo, arrayed in clerical black, now somewhat rubbed and rusty, which made the tour of his parish, and was often opened in his daily visits, and lay ready always for duty in his ample coat pocket.

"That's old Parker's book," he said with a soar smile, as he plucked it towards him. "Comes here, I believe, to look after my soul! What a wild goose chase my wandering soul has led him! The Offices of the Church — isn't that what they call them? 'The Baptism of Infants'" — he was turning over the leaves listlessly.

"And I was baptized; and my godfathers and godmothers did promise and vow in my name that I should be an exemplary Christian and an ornament to society. Promise and vow! Good gossips, easier to promise and vow than to perform. I wonder how it fared with their own CONUSORS (capital lawyer my affairs have made me — CONUSORS, yes) and whether THEY did themselves what they promised for me. I'll answer for one of them — my distinguished godfather, old Brimmestone. I'm afraid he left his own godfathers and godmothers to settle liabilities in his own case, and estreated his recognizances."

De Beaumirail shrugged and smiled coldly.

"A great sinner, and what's worse a screw, and might have been of use to me, and never was; but that's nothing remarkable."

He turned over some more leaves, and went on— "'Visitation of the Sick.' Poor old Parker — every time he comes he has his book out, and fumbles with it and looks at me. It goes to my heart to refuse him the pleasure of reading it. Why don't I allow him? I know I ought; but the flesh is weak. If smoking was allowed, I think I should. Poor old fellow, he has not an idea where it is. 'The Burial of the Dead.' 'The Solemnization of Matrimony.'" De Beaumirail laughed.

"'The Solemnization of Matrimony.' And a very solemn affair — for some of us, at least — whenever it comes."

There was a knock at his door just at this moment. De Beaumirail turned toward it, irresolute what answer to give. Probably old Mr. Parker come to reclaim his book. But no, it was too brisk a knock for that aged and timid hand.

"Which are worst," he thought — "my blue devils, or my devils incarnate? Sometimes one, sometimes the other. Enter, Satan in the flesh," he cried.

But the door was secured — he had forgotten that; and with the indolence of dejection hated being disturbed, and opened it rather bitterly.

There was the doctor, in a very rusty velveteen shooting coat, dingy tweed trousers, and battered slippers; a nightshirt buttoned at his throat, and a fez, whose tawdriness time and dust had long subdued, upon his head.

"Come in! I had no idea it was you. I thought it might have been my confessor — we'll shut the door, please — but you are the better MEDICUS by so much as I am surer I have a body than a soul."

The doctor smiled drearily and looked about him slowly, as if he expected to find new pictures on the walls, or a gilded cornice; but it was only a way he had.

"Going upstairs to see that unfortunate fellow, Captain Prude. You know him?"

"No, I don't."

"Don't you? Why, he's only right over your head."

"There's a floor between, however," said De Beaumirail.

"Drinking himself to death, poor devil; and what's worse, his poor young wife," said the doctor. "Nothing, but fluids in that room, sir. I don't think there's a pound of meat in a week."

The doctor was looking out of the window by this time with his hands in his pockets.

"And how are you getting on yourself," he said, turning about; "you look more lively to-day, don't you — how is the appetite?"

"Can't eat, sir, anything to signify."

"Let me see your tongue?"

"No, please; we'll not mind to-day," said De Beaumirail.

"Sleep?" said the doctor, after a yawn, shuffling back again to the table — "how is your sleep?"

"I don't sleep — I never was great at that," said De Beaumirail.

"You ought to look to your, sleep, however — I don't like that," said the doctor.

"Nor I. I have palpitations, sir, that shake me up, and nasty dreams when I do snatch a doze."

"And that sort of sinking you describe, we give it a technical name, sir. It is well known to us, sir; it comes from monotony; and the air being always identical, the system grows low and languid."

"They have something to answer for who keep me here," said De Beaumirail.

"Did you look at your TIMES this morning. Some capital observations of that clever fellow, Flam, the member for — what's it's name — about imprisonment for debt; and, egad, sir, for a free country it's a burning stigma and a disgrace. Look at me, here ten years the fifth of last August. The APPLEBURY HERALD, sir, had an article on my treatment of an old man there; a case of asphyxia. I have it in my drawer. I'll read it for you, it might interest you, this evening — I'm in a hurry now to see the poor fellow upstairs."

"You read it for me last week — thanks."



"Sooner or later, sir, that remnant of barbarism must be blotted from the statute book," declared the doctor, "Here am I, sir — did you ever see my paper on the diseases of glass-blowers? I'll read it for you the next time you allow me. I was complimented on that by two of the most eminent men in the profession to whom I sent copies. THE PROBANG AND FORCEPS was the only medical paper that did not speak well of it, and that was a personal feeling. I'd have been making my two or three thousand a year, and every farthing paid off by this time. It's all very well saying I should give up my £50 a year — that's all I have to subsist on — and come out; but that sort of sophistry won't hold water. Who's that new fellow crossing the court with the goldheaded cane and the imperial? Don't know, I suppose. This is his third day. Well, at all events — what was I saying? — I don't suppose, sir, this remnant of barbarism can last much longer; unless we are to fall back and lose our place in the race of nations. You have influential friends, Mr de Beaumirail; why don't you poke them up. 'A long pull, and a strong pull, and a pull altogether,' you know, might take us out of this."

"I don't take a part in the discussion, because people are so stupid that they would suspect me of a prejudice, and any attempt to swell the chorus of eloquence, from this place, might make unfeeling people laugh."

"I shouldn't wonder," said the doctor. "Did you see two women, very odd looking dressed, black lace and yellow satin, they're in about a fortnight, they have only the one dress each, Spanish, or Portuguese, or something, they keep to themselves a good deal, expect to get out, I suppose. Old Jinks, the composer, thinks they're from the opera. They sing a lot in their room — devilish loud when the window's open. The eldest is a very fine woman, a little bit pale, you know."

And the doctor yawned, and sighed "heigh-ho!"

"Take some of that ether bottle when you find yourself getting down, you know," said the doctor. "There was a fellow from the music shop in Pall Mall with old Jenks this morning — that fellow makes a nice thing of his music, setting airs, and scores, and all that — and he expected to hear all about them. I'd have looked in on him only I was in a hurry to see how the Captain is getting on."

And the doctor, notwithstanding his haste, shuffled slowly about the room, and picked the novel off the floor and read the title, and looked round the walls again, and finally whistled for two or three minutes, looking out of the window, for in such cities of the dead, there is no hurry, and they seem to have an eternity at their disposal.

He was interrupted by a sound overhead, as of something falling, which, perhaps, recalled the Captain, for he turned about and said, —

"Well — anything more to say to me?" and being satisfied on this point, he took his leave with an exhortation to De Beaumirail to keep his spirits up, and never say die, and then with another yawn, and the long-drawn "heigh-ho!" that had become habitual, he began to ascend the stairs at his leisure to the Captain.

When he was gone, De Beaumirail got up listlessly, and took for a while the doctor's place at the window, and looked out with his hands in the pockets of his dressing gown, and then after some time he saw, as he ruminated, Mr. Levi, the Jew, and Mr. Larkin, the Christian, crossing the court in conversation, as they approached his quarters.

Looking down upon them, with that kind of dislike, which the face betrays while looking upon an ugly reptile, Mr de Beaumirail, in cold blood, I am sorry to say, cursed them both, very particularly, and then admitted them to his room, and heard all they had to say with the intense but odious interest with which an unscrupulous candidate may listen to the talk and suggestions of a pair of electioneering villains in his pay.

## CHAPTER XXIII.

### MR. DACRE SEES A LETTER.

WHEN Mr. Dacre entered the drawing room at Guildford House this evening, Mrs. Wardell was alone, and greeted him with her accustomed kindness.

"Laura will be down, I expect, in a minute or two. She was in her room writing a line to poor Charles Mannering."

"Not telling him, is she, that he was hit with a pistol-bullet?" inquired Dacre, with an odd smile.

"No, we agreed that it would only vex him our knowing the nature of his accident, and, although nothing could be more reprehensible, yet it is not just yet the time to find fault."

"Besides, you know, it would not do to let him know that I told you. He might have another duel on his hands before he had well recovered the first," Dacre laughed; "and I fancy he has had quite enough of that kind of thing for the present."

"Oh, dear! no," said Mrs. Wardell; "that would be treating you very ill."

"Running my head into the lion's mouth," and Dacre smiled; "a formidable lion, no doubt, though a wounded one. The bulletin to-day, I'm glad to tell you, is quite satisfactory; no fever to signify, and no prescription but to keep quiet; in fact, he is a most fortunate patient. The luxurious importance of an invalid; the interest of a hero, and ample leisure to read his TIMES, and his novels, and to repent."

"The last I do hope," said Mrs. Wardell, accepting Dacre's speech in perfect good faith: "and we have had a very satisfactory communication also. We were thinking of driving down in a few days to that place, just to inquire. I think it would be kind, don't you? and show that we took an interest."

"Well, of course it would be kind; but there's such a thing as killing people with kindness, and my friend tells me that none of his friends must call even at the door; so says the doctor."

"Why he can't mean that talking to the waiter at the door would kill Charles Mannering upstairs in his bedroom?" exclaimed Julia Wardell.

"That doesn't exactly describe the process," said Dacre, laughing. "What he says is this — for the same paradox struck me also — that it would be less likely to put him in a fever for people to go direct into his room, and talk to him half the day, than to excite and tantalize him by such calls; he'd be sure to hear of them, and he'd insist on seeing the people, and if the waiters disobeyed him, he'd blow them up, and get himself into such a nervous excitement, that mischief would inevitably follow."

"Well, we only thought of it; but, perhaps, the doctor knows best," said Mrs. Wardell, placing her fat, short fingers on some letters that lay on the table beside her, and picking out one, which she presented to him, saying — "Just read that."

"Thank you," said Dacre, preparing to be bored with a long epistle from the Silver Dragon. It turned out, however, to be a totally different thing. Mrs. Wardell had addressed herself to converse with her dog, now happily recovering and occupying his cushion on the sofa beside her. The letter which Dacre had been invited to read, and which soon interested him intensely and disagreeably, was certainly not that which Mrs. Wardell had intended to give him.

It was in these terms, after a few lines of inquiry —

"You can't think how beautiful the scenery is here. As I write, I command a view so like some of the glimpses down the glens of the Apennines. I think if you were in this part of the world for a summer it would end in your building a castle, and becoming a lady of the Lake (by-the-by, such lakes! and I think those cold mists which stupid people complain of, so fine, so singular, and so effective a contrast, when they rise and dissipate themselves — contrast, you understand, by way of preparation, to the noble colouring of these grand Caledonian landscapes). My parenthesis has run to such a length that you will let me off finishing the sentence. I like the people here so much. The peasantry so unaffectedly republican in tone and demeanour, and so feudal in their attachment. My host, you know, is YOUR kinsman as well as mine. You would, I think, like him and his wife so much. She is not a beauty, and in so far does not resemble you. But in many ways she reminds me so of you, and this being so, I can't, of course, describe her, only, I know you would like her, and she would be charmed with you; and, therefore, if she asks you to Lochlinnir, I counsel you by all means to go. I wish I could say COME."

But I shall be in — shire a week before you could make up your mind. Therefore, I'm not selfish when I say DO accept when she invites you, which, I know, she meditates. She means, also, to ask Mrs. Wardell to accompany you. She consulted me on the subject, and asked whether you would come. I said, 'Yes.' Pray, don't disappoint and make me tell a fib. But my dear Challys, it strikes me, an excursion of this kind would be the very thing you would probably wish, for quite other reasons. Will you think me very impertinent? I am sure you won't — you have always listened to my advice so kindly. Recollect it shall be only advice; for, even if I had a right to blame, you are not the least to blame in this matter. I only venture a caution — shall I say a warning? There is an acquaintance I want you to drop. You must not allow Mr. Dacre to call at Guildford House any more; quietly say — not at home. It is only to repeat the exorcism half-a-dozen times, and that spirit is laid. I can't say more. My reasons are quite sufficient. When I am at liberty to state them you will THANK me. I feel happier now that I have got that off my mind; and pray, dear Challys, don't condemn my warning."

Then came some gossip, and then this passage —

"I have had a letter from Charles Mannering, who has had an adventure, and got himself hurt somehow; but, he tells me, it will be nothing."

It ended with a word or two more, and the signature, "Ardenbroke;" and, smiling, Alfred Dacre returned it gently to its envelope, and while the old lady continued her talk with her dog, he slipped it among the two or three other letters on the table — still smiling.

He was smiling, while his heart swelled with wrath and bitterness.

"Well, that's very satisfactory, isn't it?" said good Mrs. Wardell, who had plainly mistaken the latter.

"He's sure to do well, as I said, if only he does as his doctor bids him."

"And I hope YOU have been quite well?" she said, suddenly observing how very pale he looked.

"I? Oh, I've been — yes, perfectly well, thank you," he said, in a rather bewildered way; "very well, thanks — a little — a little tired, I think — that's all — where is Miss Gray?"

"I told you she's writing a note; I think it must be finished by this time."

"Oh, I beg pardon; to be sure you did, and I have no business asking — I think I'm half asleep; I sat up nearly all last night over papers and accounts, and I really am little better than a somnambulist; a cup of your tea will, however, set me up again, and I shall be wide awake in a minute."

"I know the sensation so well; yes, indeed. Would you mind touching the bell? we shall have tea in a moment, and — here's Laura."

Laura received him very graciously this evening. She smiled more; her manner seemed also sadder and more subdued. Had she been crying? No; there were none of the unbecoming evidences of that feminine occupation. But did not her fine dark eyes look tearful? Could it be about that letter; and was she weak enough to adopt its advice?

She sat down at the piano, and, with one hand, ran lightly over the notes. With a dark and piercing gaze he looked unobserved in her face. There was another feeling mingling in his anger, but he would not acknowledge it; it surprised, and almost alarmed him.

He drew near, and sat beside her at the piano.

"Miss Gray, I think — will you forgive me? — I think something has vexed you.

She was looking down at the notes which she was touching lightly with one hand, and she said, without raising her eyes —

"Yes, I am vexed; very much vexed."

"Not with me, I hope, Miss Gray," he nearly whispered, but he looked very sad and uncertain.

"Certainly not; oh, Mr. Dacre! my true and brave friend, how could you think so?"

She spoke with a kind of enthusiasm that thrilled him, and, at the same time, extended her hand, which he took. His was very cold; he looked as pale as a dying man, and he gazed in her face with his eyes full of a strange fire. Was it confusion — was it love — was it remorse? It was so intense she could not endure it. She felt a shudder in his hand; and, with a short sigh, like a gasp, he raised her hand to his lips, and passionately kissed it.

"What have I done? Forgive me, Miss Gray, I am very unhappy; I fancied you were — offended with me, and in the rapture of your acquittal, I forgot myself, and the immeasurable fate that separates us."

She drew her hand back from him. He did not attempt to retain it. She had blushed intensely, but treated this stage act as the wildness of a moment. So estimating, it was, perhaps, more dignified to ignore it as she did.

"Not with you, but very much vexed with Ardenbroke and with Charles Mannering.

"I'm sure you'll forgive them," said he.

"Well, I don't know; I suppose I shall; but why do you say so?" she said.

"Because some people are so fortunate," he said, dejectedly.

"And others are so unfortunate?" she added.

"Yes, others are so unfortunate."

## CHAPTER XXIV.

### “OH, COME TO ME WHEN DAYLIGHT SETS.”

A little silence followed these enigmatical speeches. She went on fiddling with the treble of an air, looking on her fingers. He stood beside her looking down upon her.

“I see, Miss Gray,” he said at last, “that you are a very good friend; I can be that — I could, at least, once. But I have found that people who are so, are also very steadfast enemies; I mean, I have found it so in myself. I have met many traitors; the world is full of simulated friendships and dissembled hatreds. I prefer a frank enemy to a flatterer. You never cherished an enmity; I have.”

“People have accused me of being vindictive; that is, not generally, but in one particular case, and I never was; but no one person quite understands another in this world.”

“I was on the point of being very impertinent; I was near asking a question,” said he.

“Well?” she said, still looking down on the notes.

“I was going to ask in what particular case that was; but I have no right, and I shan’t venture.”

He had chosen to interpret that “well?” as an invitation to put his question.

“No, you are right; we shan’t mind; we’ll not talk about it,” answered she.

“I’m sorry,” he said.

“And why sorry?” asked she.

“Because it interests me so much,” said he.

“Well, it makes me sad, that is my only reason. I’m not afraid; I’m never afraid of anything I do, but I am sorry whenever I think of that,” she said.

“May I guess?” said he.

“Why?” she asked.

“I want to know; I long to know.”

“You are curious, then?”

“Very,” said he.

“I thought that curiosity was a feminine grace, and that you men boasted of never being curious.”

“Well, I shall ask but one question.”

“I don’t much mind, then, if I answer it. Go on, I’m listening.”

“Is it, then, De Beaumirail?” he asked.

“Yes; how did you guess it?”

“Because you hinted the same thing once before, though not so distinctly; and you really, then, regret your not having liberated that odious fellow?” exclaimed Dacre. “I beg your pardon, but is not that a very misplaced remorse, Miss Gray?”

“It is well that we don’t judge as harshly, always, as you men.”

“Equally well, Miss Gray, that we don’t always judge as mercifully as you — earth is no place for the angelic attributes — in this game that we call life; the diabolic carries all before it, the angels are nowhere. I don’t speak in particular of De Beaumirail, though I don’t take the indulgent view of his character that Ardenbroke does. But that, you will say, has something of malice in it; for no man living ever injured me so deeply as De Beaumirail. All I say is the general rule, you can’t govern, the world by kindness. Hell must be ruled with a strong hand, and so must the earth; the devils would swarm up, otherwise, and scale heaven.”

“Didn’t I hear you mention Mr de Beaumirail?” inquired Mrs. Wardell, who had overheard the name.

“Yes; so I did,” answered Dacre.

“And what do you think of him?” asked Mrs. Wardell; “of his appearance — his looks, I mean?”

“I never venture any such criticism in presence of ladies; they see with a truer eye. What is your opinion, Miss Gray?”

“I never saw him.”

“Never say De Beaumirail? I thought you told me you had seen him; perhaps it was he who said he had seen you, and of course, in that case, the boast is not very likely to be true. I can only say, Mrs. Wardell, that I shall defer to your judgment in that matter, for I don’t like him, and could not judge him fairly.”

“But I can’t tell any more than Laura.”

“Why you must have seen him at Gray Forest, have not you? He told me he has been there.”

“So I think he was,” said Julia Wardell, “but never while I was there.”

“No, he was not very often there,” said Laura; “I believe about three times, and not for very long. I was in France, and never saw him there, nor anywhere else that I remember, and I don’t care to hear about him; I mean, of course, what he is like. The whole subject is bitter to me, and I would give a year of my life that I dared set him free; but I can’t, and my real helplessness, where I seem to have the sole power, is the most miserable reflection of my life.”

“What! really sorry you can’t let that scamp loose upon the world?” said Dacre, with a little shrug and a smile. “I admire the charity of your angelic sex, Miss Gray, but I do believe there is no way to its heart, like being a bit of a MAUVAIS SUJET. I envy De Beaumirail; it is so pleasant, exciting a compassion on such easy terms. But our leaning is quite the other way. We don’t take an interest in scamps; their lives and motives are no mystery to us. Nothing awful or romantic about them; simple selfishness, I mean a life of folly, and champagne, the dice-box, and the pistol, ending in broken fortunes and reputation, and liberty and light itself, LOST.”

"And how can you think that is not pitiable, Mr. Dacre? The most pitiable of all miseries are those which overtake us from want of prudence, which seems to me so much the virtue of selfishness and hypocrisy."

I think Dacre rather liked this doctrine, at least it did not shock him, for he smiled darkly with pleasure, one would have said, as she enunciated it, while Mrs. Wardell, more orthodox, exclaimed —

"Laura, my dear, how can you?"

"I believe it is quite true," said Dacre, laughing; "prudence is active fear, and active fear is cowardice; at the same time, I am happy to say that I have learned that kind of cowardice myself. De Beaumirail has taught me a lesson or two in it, so valuable, although he exacted a very high price for them, that I almost forgive him."

"Is he as good-looking as people say?" asked Mrs. Wardell, recurring to her point.

The window was open, and the rich perfume of flowers exhaling in the sultry night, hung in the air. Laura Gray changed her place, and sat by the window, while Dacre, answering Mrs. Wardell, said —

"I could not describe him conscientiously; but I want very much to see him, and will, although he refused me that honour a few nights ago. Suppose I ask him for his CARTE DE VISILE when he favours me with an interview? The fact really is, at least, in my case, that if I don't like a man I can't admire him, and De Beaumirail has hit me too often and too hard to allow me to like him; and, altogether, I am ashamed of him."

Looking out in that luxurious atmosphere of fragrance, it was Laura's turn to smile now — what was her thought? Might it not be something like this? —

"Poor Charles Mannering can't say a good word of Mr. Dacre, and Mr. Dacre can't see anything good in Mr de Beaumirail. How jealous they are, one of another; praise a man, and his sex are ready to tear him to pieces. They hate one to think, or fancy, any other man even good-looking." Laura was smiling silently from the window — not a satirical smile — a smile with that indefinable air of gratification and victory in it, which, in a beautiful and gracious face, has such a charm.

"Well, you must not mention me, Mr. Dacre; but I really am curious," said Julia Wardell, "I have heard so much about him. There's an old clergyman, a Mr. Parker, who came here constantly to lecture Laura for not letting him out; and Mr. Gryston talks of him, and Ardenbroke, and Charles Mannering; and I've always heard him talked about in the Gray family; so, naturally, I wish to see him. Shall we get his photo', Laura?"

"I'll manage it, if you tell me?" said Dacre, looking at Miss Gray.

"No, I should not wish it. Pray don't think of it," said Laura, her curiosity overcome by a kind of disgust.

"Are you serious?"

"Perfectly; I shouldn't like it."

"I'm sure you are curious?"

"So she is — very curious," interposed Julia Wardell.

"I should not look at it — nothing would pain me more. I don't like talking of him. I don't like thinking of him. He is suffering, and I am the passive instrument of his suffering. I pity him — I know how odious I must seem to others — and yet, from a feeling which I won't explain — I suppose you would laugh at me — a feeling that I can't explain — I am powerless. But I won't endure any jesting on the subject; it is so heartless, and it is cruel, besides, to me."

"What an empress she is!" exclaimed Julia Wardell.

"Empress, indeed," echoed Dacre, with a different meaning it seemed.

"Yes, about that very imperious," she continued. "I wish he would let me be of use to him — such use as I can — but he is so impracticable, and so angry with me, and can I wonder at his hating me? I assure you, Mr. Dacre, I could kneel at his feet to ask his forgiveness; and I know I am governed by a kind of madness, but I can't overcome it; and even talking of him makes me so miserably nervous. Julia Wardell, you ought to know it; and, Mr. Dacre, I implore of you to mention him no more." Dacre looked at her with a strange curiosity.

"You can always command ME, Miss Gray. I shall always do, or leave undone, precisely as you desire me."

"That's very kind of you, Mr. Dacre; but I should be very sorry to accept such a prerogative except in two or three things; and one" — she continued, with a little laugh — "unquestionably is your beautiful music."

"Certainly," said he, with alacrity unusual in singers, rising and approaching the piano; "only tell me what I shall sing.

"Something about the moon, I think," he glanced through the open window, through which he could see the broad moonlight spread like a hoarfrost over grass and leaves — and instantly touching the chords, with a little laugh he sang a few bars of Byron's early song:

"Oh, come to me when daylight sets,  
Sweet, then come to mo,  
When smoothly glide our gondolets  
O'er the moonlit sea."

He stopped, and laughed again.

"You must forgive me — very impudent of me to sing such hackneyed music for Miss Gray, even in jest. But, seriously, order any song I can sing — I'm only too much honoured."

"And, seriously, I like that little Venetian song best of any. I feel the motion of the gondola as you sing. Of course, if it is not well sung, silence were better, but you sing it with the true feeling. I know you have been in Venice, as I listen."

"I had no idea my little jest would end in such a success. I shall always think better of the song, and with a kind of gratitude."

## CHAPTER XXV.

### AN EVIL EYE.

So, without more fuss about it, he sang it through, and being encored by both ladies, he commenced it again. He was still singing, when Laura, who was sitting at the window, looking out, as she leaned on her hand and listened, rose suddenly, drawing back, with a shuddering "Oh!" as if she had seen something frightful.

"Shut the window — shut the door — downstairs, I mean."

Mr. Dacre had risen and approached, and even Mrs. Wardell had stood up, gazing with an alarmed curiosity on the young lady.

"What is it, Miss Gray?" he said, looking earnestly in her pale face.

"What's the matter, Laura dear? for heaven's sake don't be foolish!" exclaimed Mrs. Wardell, with the peremptoriness of panic.

Dacre looked from the window, but saw nothing unusual.

"There's nothing there, I assure you," he said. "Pray tell me what I can do — I've shut the window as you desired."

"That dreadful little man — that horrible Jew," said Miss Gray.

"Where — where was he?" asked Dacre, eagerly looking again from the window.

"He came out suddenly from under one of the trees — from the shadow — and looked up at the window. I could not be mistaken."

Before she could interpose a word, Dacre had left the room. She saw him run down the steps, and, with a hasty glance round him, continue his course, bareheaded, down the avenue.

His carriage stood about halfway down. He passed it, and opened the gate, and made a survey up and down the narrow road. Then he returned slowly, looking under and about the trees. They saw him stop and speak, it seemed, with the driver, and then slowly, and often looking about him, resume his way to the house.

"I'm very glad he did not overtake him," exclaimed Laura.

"But, my dear, what did you mean by saying a Jew? You don't know any Jews. Jews, indeed! What could you mean?" exclaimed Mrs. Wardell, who had been too much engrossed in watching Mr. Dacre's proceedings from the window, to put her question before.

"Yes, there is a Jewish face — one of the wickedest I could have imagined," said Laura, vehemently. "We saw it, at least I did, at the synagogue. I saw it here another night, looking in at the library window, and I now remember, what I could not recollect before, that I first saw that odious face among the people who came here the day after we arrived, to urge me to give that miserable Mr de Beaumirail his liberty."

At this moment Mr. Dacre entered the room.

"Not a trace of him. I looked in all directions, the moment I got down. I asked at the gate. I inquired of the driver whether anyone had passed him, and there has been no one. Could it possibly have been fancy?"

"Quite impossible, I assure you. No, I saw him as distinctly as ever I saw anything in my life," said Laura Gray, very much troubled.

"But is he a dangerous person?" demanded Mrs. Wardell, proceeding to ring the bell vehemently.

"I cant tell, I'm sure," said Laura; "I can't describe the fear and loathing with which I see that man's face. Mr. Dacre, forgot to ask, did you shut the hall-door?"

"Yes. Oh, yes; I'm quite sure."

"Don't you think, Mr. Dacre," said Laura Gray, "that it would be well to tell Mr. Gryston all about that man's prowling about this place, now that I remember him accurately; of course, we know who he is; his name, and everything about him; and Mr. Gryston would know what steps to take."

"Don't think of such a thing — pray don't," urged Mr. Dacre; "if you do, you defeat all my plans, and nothing could be more provoking; for I am on the point, as I told you, of success."

"Well, I don't know; I have a misgiving," said Laura Gray. "Why should we contend with those wicked people? I have a foreboding that something bad will come of it, if I don't give way; and after all, whatever you may think, I am persuaded it is only to leave this place, and I should never be pursued."

"Miss Gray,! KNOW the reverse."

"Know it? How can you know it?" asked Challys Gray.

"Have you never read in that tiny romance, Lewis's 'Bravo of Venice,' how Flodoardo — I beg pardon for naming myself with so perfect a hero — associates, under the name of Abelino, with the assassins who hold the city in awe and enlists in the conspiracy against its government, for the purpose of delivering them all to the executioner? Now, my little counter-plot is near its crisis, only don't disturb my operations, and do give me a few days more."

"What is all this about Venice and its conspirators?" asked Mrs. Wardell, a little perplexed. "I don't understand what on earth you mean."

Dacre laughed. He had been speaking a little inadvertently, and did not care to be more explicit to Mrs. Wardell.

"It is all taken from an old novel," said he. "But it is too long a story to ask you to listen to; besides, I don't remember it well enough, and, Miss Gray, I'm afraid you have been made very nervous. I only wish I could have secured that little wretch, but I'll find a way to reach him tomorrow morning."

"No, Mr. Dacre, I said before, you are not to be running into danger — you must not."

"You must give me a few days more — very few — if I fail, I fail, and so — good night."

And with these words Dacre took his departure. He raised his hat as he looked up, and then swiftly disappeared under the shadow of the trees.

Dacre that night was in an odd mood. He felt as he fancied he never should have felt. In addition to that strange feeling, there were a dreadful agitation and gloom. He looked round him for a moment. The light from the drawingroom — the moonlight, and the trees — the very road under his feet, its dust mottled with patches of white moonlight and shadow, seemed unreal, like things seen in a vision. He stepped into his carriage, which began to drive away toward town.

When Dacre turned from the window, he saw in the opposite corner of the carriage a little figure in black HUDDLED up in a cloak.

“Got in here, Mr. Dacre; changed my mind, sir,” said this person from his corner, in reply to a rough poke with Dacre’s foot.

“Ha! so I see, sir,” answered Dacre, “I had not expected this pleasure; you asked me to set you down at the gate, and you said you had business in some pot-house, the Bell and Horns, or something like that, and that you meant to walk home, and walk home you shall.”

He pulled the check-string, and brought the brougham to a standstill— “And what the devil did you mean by going to the front of the house, and staring up at the windows? Well for you I did not find you, I’d have beaten you to pieces, you little blackguard.”

“Grood at the fists?” (fishts he called them) said the Jew, serenely.

“Open that door,” called Mr. Dacre, and opened accordingly it was.

“Now you get out and walk, or I’ll make you,” said he.

The Jew was a pugilist. Notwithstanding Mr. Dacre’s stature, the little man at a glance knew that if he were uninitiated in “the science of self defence,” he could, as he expressed it, “lick him into fits;” but there were very strong reasons for keeping the peace; and although the Jew flushed, and his great mouth looked ferocious, and his prominent black eyes glared like fire, he controlled himself, and said —

“You might give a fellow a lift as far as Lees’s, in the Strand?”

The inquiring tone elicited no encouraging answer. Mr. Dacre said, more menacingly, “Get down, sir, or I’ll make you; and mind, if you and your friends expect help from me, you must come to my rooms at eleven tomorrow morning, and do what I tell you; and now, get out of this carriage, if you please.”

In this peremptory way was Mr. Levi set down, and the carriage drove away, leaving the Jew in a virulent temper, and a long walk to accomplish between the Bell and Horns, and Bees’s divan in the Strand.

## CHAPTER XXVI.

### THE COUNTESS OF ARDENBROKE HAS A WORD TO SAY.

Next day old Lady Ardenbroke called at Guildford House. She was better, and came in, but did not venture to mount the stairs. She sat down in the library, and Laura Gray ran down and was really glad to see her.

The old lady kissed her, and mentally approved her looks. She thought she was looking even lovelier than when she saw her last. She was pleased with these brilliant looks, and drew nearer to her in spirit, and chatted kindly and smilingly, and looked in her face with pleased eyes as she answered —

“And, my dear, I have come partly to tell you that I mean to worry you out of this horrid old house. I can’t understand what you mean by shutting yourself up here.”

“I like it — I really do.”

“Now you shan’t tell stories. You don’t like it. What you mean is, that you came here thinking you should like it, just as foolish girls take the veil in a dream, with this difference, that your awaking has come earlier, and your folly is not irrevocable. I’ve come, however, with a resolution to make you act like a sane person, and take your proper place in the world.”

“I’m not ambitious, auntie.”

“And more shame for you. The idea of a creature like you shutting yourself up in this region of slumber, and milkmen, and humdrum, and vulgarity! If you ain’t crazed already you soon will be, if you remain here. I’m an old woman, and I assure you I could not live here. Such gloom! — those frightful trees, and this clumsy house, and that road before your door, where nothing seems ever to pass except my carriage, when my doctor allows: me to make you a visit. It’s fit, my dear Laura, for nothing but a madhouse or a nunnery.”

“But it suits me. I’m half a lunatic, perhaps, and a half nun. I don’t know,” said Challys Gray, “I only know that I should dislike extremely the other kind of life into which one would be sure to be drawn, unless one were to dwell in this other unseen world, and hating that world so intensely, with me it is only a choice between Guildford House and a wandering life — as lonely, among towns and scenery of Spain and Italy, and perhaps of Palestine; and I think I’m out of spirits.”

“You are brooding over that business of De Beaumirail?”

“Not so much as I ought, I dare say.”

“Well, you know, if it troubles you keeping him locked up there, you can let HIM out whenever you please; and I think it would be much wiser, I confess, than making atonement by shutting yourself up in a prison.”

Laura laughed.

“No, indeed, I’m not doing penance. If I were, I should be going to all manner of parties, kettledrums, and other tumultuous assemblies; but this quiet life is really the thing I like best.”

“Well, it’s contrary to nature, and there is only one way of accounting for it,” said the old lady, fixing her still fine black eyes upon Laura with a kind of penetration that called, as it were, a dawning blush to her cheek. The old Countess shook her head significantly as she looked with a meaning smile, and was silent.

“There’s no accounting for tastes, however,” said Laura, rallying; “and all I can say is, that I have a decided taste for moping.”

“I suspect, my dear, there is more in your contented solitude than you choose to say.”

“I don’t understand—”

“I mean, dear, in this seclusion, in your maiden meditation, you are not quite so fancy-free as a nun should be.”

The blush that faintly showed itself just now, at these words, spread in a moment in a beautiful crimson flood, and conscious of the apparent self-betrayal, she felt very much vexed and disconcerted.

“Of course I blush just when I should not,” she said, “and when there is absolutely no excuse on earth for blushing, except your looking so archly, and leaving me at the same time without the slightest clue to your meaning. There now, it’s so provoking. You smile again and nod. Do tell me, darling, what it is you mean?”

“Why, my dear, I mean what I say. I mean there is nothing like a little romance for inducing a taste for solitude,” said Lady Ardenbroke.

“And who ever fancied that I, of all people, was romantic, and who could one find in such a situation to play the part of hero?” pleaded Laura Gray, a little disdainfully.

“I’m sure it is not for me to say,” said the old lady. “But why not your cousin, Charles Mannering?”

“Charles Mannering!” exclaimed Miss Gray.

“Yes, Charles Mannering, with his wounds and knight-errantry; you know as well as I do that he is madly in love with you.” Relieved by the direction of Lady Ardenbroke’s attack, it yet embarrassed her extremely; for the occurrence of only a week or so before instantly presented itself to her mind, and she gazed for some seconds into her old relative’s face confounded and without a word to say.

“Upon my word, for a young lady so entirely proof against such weaknesses, you do blush wonderfully like a guilty person.” And at those words the old lady smiled again provokingly.

“You are quite mistaken, dear auntie; never were more mistaken in your life. I assure you there is nothing of the kind, and I don’t know anything that would vex me more than its being supposed, except, indeed, there being any — the slightest — foundation for it.”

“Well, I see nothing to be ashamed of, if it were so,” said Lady Ardenbroke. “He’s very amiable, and Ardenbroke says he’s clever; and you know he’s not by any means a lackland, he’ll have three or four thousand a year.”



"Now you MUST believe me; there is nothing of that kind. We are very good friends, but any idea of that sort would quite put an end to our pleasant relations, and leave me, for the present at least, very destitute of friends. Do you believe me?"

"I'm sure, at least, you always intend to tell truths, and I'll not dispute it now, Laura; and I do think you ought to do a great deal better than Charles Mannering. There's Ardenbroke. No, dear, you need not laugh. I know you are first cousins, and that ends it; but I should be very glad indeed, if Ardenbroke were to marry half as well, and the moral what of I say is just this — if you had only one twentieth the ambition that you have got beauty, cleverness, and fortune, you might do anything."

"And when does Ardenbroke come back," asked Laura Gray, after a little laugh.

"He doesn't say; but he sends all kinds of messages to you, and I've forgotten his letter, but he told me particularly to call and see you, and, in short, he speaks of your convent life just as I do, and, indeed, as every person of sense, except yourself, must do."

Laura recollected a passage in the letter she had received only a few days before from Lord Ardenbroke, the same which blundering Mrs. Wardell had placed instead of quite another in Alfred Dacre's hands. Of this mistake, indeed, the young lady knew nothing. If she had, she would, I dare say, have been very uncomfortable indeed.

"I had a note from him — a letter," said Laura. "He seems to like his Scotch friends so much."

Laura felt a little uncomfortably. That sentence or two about Alfred Dacre weighed upon her like a secret, and for the world she would not have mentioned it to Lady Ardenbroke. Had the absent peer written to his mother in the same sense, and had she paid her visit at Guildford House expressly for the purpose of giving her some advice?

Laura Gray was preparing herself for debate, not of a pleasant kind for a person as true as she was. In her nervous state of expectation, she had got up and stood settling some flowers in a vase that stood upon the table. I think she was glad that she had thought of that occupation, when the old countess said —

"And Ardenbroke has made me so curious; he says an old acquaintance of mine, as well as his, has turned up in London. He speaks of him as if in some kind of alarm, and says he hopes his visit may not be attended with trouble to any of our relations. I have written to him asking him all kinds of questions, and I have been puzzling my old head over his sentences ever since his letter came. Didn't you mention something about a Mr.

Dacre — I've been thinking he may be the person — didn't you?"

"I — I asked you about that family, but I'm not sure that I mentioned any one in particular — did I?" said Laura Gray, quite honestly, still settling the flowers, and looking more narrowly into them.

"I thought you did, but I'm not sure. Do you know any one of that name?"

Had Ardenbroke sent her to learn how matters really stood?

"Yes, I do know a Mr. Dacre," she said, standing upright and preparing to be offended.

But old Lady Ardenbroke's face betrayed no symptom of that sort of craft or suspicion which Laura had for a moment apprehended.

"I was not quite certain; but possibly some Mr. Dacre is the person; they are connected with us, and it was floating in my mind. A very pretty young man Alfred Dacre was, but not a safe companion, I thought, for Ardenbroke, and I was very glad when he went away. What is the name of your acquaintance?"

"Alfred — ALFRED Dacre," said Laura Gray, with an effort.

"Oh! really? I suppose it is the same. He is n kind of cousin of Ardenbroke's. I think he was quarrelsome. I heard of his fighting two duels in France, and when he and Ardenbroke, who is, you know, the most goodnatured creature on earth, were together in Paris, he contrived to get him into a scrape of the same kind; it certainly was he, and it was simply the mercy of God that saved him, for the man he fought with was a professed duellist — a Count Droqueville — who ruined himself afterwards, I heard, at play; and I have been quite uneasy ever since Ardenbroke's letter reached me lest that VAUTRIEN, Mr. Dacre, should have turned up again; for I need not say how objectionable a companion I thought him, and, to say truth, it was one reason of my calling here to-day. I wonder whether it is the same. What is he like?"

This was a difficult question for Miss Gray, and, after a momentary puzzle, she said —

"It is so hard to give a general description. Wouldn't it be better if you were to ask me any questions that strike you?"

"I think Alfred Dacre, if he is alive, but I'm nearly certain I heard he was dead, would be about five-and-thirty now. Does he look that?" inquired the old lady.

"No; certainly not; not, I think, quite thirty," said Laura.

"Thirty — and five — and three," said Lady Ardenbroke, reflectively, touching the tips of her fingers. "I really think he must be at least thirty-eight."

"Then that point is quite settled, for I don't think he can possibly be more than I said," Laura answered, with a kind of relief. But recollecting that old Lady Ardenbroke was not always infallible in the matter of figures, on reflection, she added, "Perhaps when you write it would be as well to ask Ardenbroke directly whether he does mean Mr. Alfred Dacre, and, if so, where Mr. Dacre is at present in London, and what he is doing. That is, I mean if your anxiety is caused by your apprehension that he does mean that particular Mr. Dacre?"

"I think I will, dear, for it does make me VERY uncomfortable."

And with these words the old lady took her leave, and Laura Gray, standing at the library window, ruminated and unpleasantly connected the jumbled recollections of the old countess with the warning conveyed in such decided terms in the letter she had so lately received from Lord Ardenbroke.

"I wonder why he stays so long away, or why he does not speak more plainly. As to offending people who have been so kind to me, simply because others don't like them, and won't say why, I'll never do that — he has been so goodnatured in this unpleasant business, and so zealous without making the least fuss about it, and then really a little music is such a pleasure in our lonely life — and such music — and what monsters we should appear, what stupidity, and caprice, and positive ingratitude. If people want to make me do such things, at least they must condescend to give me a reason for it."

"I met Lady Ardenbroke on the steps," said fat Mrs. Wardell, entering; "how miserably thin she looks! Any news of Ardenbroke, or anything? Poor old soul, I did not like to delay her a moment, she did look so tired." And so, Julia Wardell untied her bonnet-strings, and sat down to hear the news which, as we know, was not much.

## CHAPTER XXVII.

### DESULTORY.

IN the evening, I should say the early night, that much suspected, wayward, handsome Alfred Dacre was, as usual, approaching Guildford House in his carriage.

In certain states of fancy and feeling how interesting a scene the most commonplace and homely will grow. Where is the old fellow of fifty for whom some bit of woodland, some quiet road, some drowsy landscape, which other eyes scarcely look at, much less read, has not an inner meaning, sad and sweet. The sun shines tenderly there, the air breathes over it like a sigh; the wallflower and woodbine are fragrant with a perfume they know nowhere else. It is dreamland, an early romance lived and died there, and all is beautiful and sweet, and musical, in its melancholy haunt.

This kind of interest to endure as long as memory itself, was Dacre half unconsciously founding for himself. These trees and houses which night after night he had passed on the same route, had gradually acquired a friendly and romantic air, and he was growing to love them.

These visits to Guildford House — would not his life be dull without them? Could he quite define the feelings with which he returned there night after night? Not easily. They were so complex — odd — yet on the whole exciting — delightful.

There was one very unpleasant image, however, which every now and then recurred. It was that of Ardenbroke. Sometimes at his desk writing a letter, sometimes suddenly recalled to town, and talking earnestly with Laura Gray, in the drawingroom of Guildford House.

"There's no use on earth in writing to him," thought he. "But when my friend Ardenbroke comes to town he and I shall talk a little."

He thought he could understand Miss Gray's marked welcome. He had read Ardenbroke's letter, and felt that the kindness of her greeting was a recoil against something like dictation.

It was generous. It might last for a time, but it was not to be relied on.

"When does Ardenbroke come to town?" he asked.

"From all I can learn I fancy not sooner than a month," she answered.

"Oh," said he; and he thought a good deal might be done in a month.

"We were speaking of Mr de Beaumirail the other night — do you recollect?" said she.

"Dear me! Has he been giving you any more trouble?" asked Dacre, eagerly.

"Not directly, but through that good old man, Mr. Parker, whom I can't refuse to listen to," she answered.

"Not refuse? — why, to be sure you can. Pray forgive me," said he, "but it does seem to me a pity, I think, that you should be so easily moved by such appeals. What business has that old man, when once you have acquainted him with your decision, to go on teasing you? I believe he's a good old man, but he has no right on earth to annoy you with his importunities. Isn't he growing positively impertinent?"

"I think you took his part a little time ago, when I was impatient," said Laura.

"Did I? Well, that was before you honoured me with a commission which it was impossible to hold, and not to feel a very absorbing interest in your tranquillity," he replied. "That old man is — I have not seen him for years, I think, but I know a good deal of him — he's officious, he's extremely troublesome, he's the worst kind of bore — a bore on the highest principles, who thinks it his duty to bore you, and consequently is quite above the laws of either compassion or fatigue."

"He is, I think, very good and simple," said Laura, with a grave decision.

"I should almost fancy, Miss Gray, from your liking for his ambassador, that you had begun to feel an interest in De Beaumirail," said Alfred Dacre.

"An interest — I don't quite see."

"Well, that is not quite what I mean. What I do conjecture is, that your feelings have become mitigated, and that you are, in secret, more favourably disposed —"

"No; there is nothing of the kind," interrupted Miss Gray.

"No relenting?" he continued.

"I can't make myself clear. There is a personal feeling — but not revenge — there are circumstances which have fixed in my mind respecting him an insurmountable disgust."

"With respect to a person you never saw?" exclaimed Mr. Dacre.

"Whom I never saw — but whom I know to be the incarnation of cruelty and perfidy," she said, with an almost whispered vehemence.

"Oh! One learns as one gets on. There is a great deal I have reason to resent in De Beaumirail, and which I do resent, as I think he knows. But you say perfidy and cruelty; well, that is a new light upon his character — so far as I fancied I knew it. I think it will rather surprise Ardenbroke also."

"Yes; Ardenbroke, and Charles Mannering, and you. Men have a way of estimating character which is peculiar to themselves; but it is not mine, nor at all like it," said Miss Gray.

"From which I conjecture that Ardenbroke does NOT think him cruel or perfidious?" said Dacre.

"I don't blame you, because you don't know the facts," answered she.

"I don't see, quite, those things in his character, that is, in a greater degree than we find them in the odious average of human nature; but I do see no end of bad traits there, at least what we men consider bad."

"I should really be glad to know what you do consider bad," said Laura. "No ill-usage of us poor women ever comes under that category, and even murder, as in the recent case of the Knight of the Silver Dragon — is excepted — pray then what is a bad

action?"

"It is not easily defined; but I think I should describe a morally bad action to be any action of another person's which is attended with serious inconvenience to myself," said Dacre.

"Now that is so like you, Mr. Dacre; you can never be serious for a moment, remarked Laura Gray.

"On the contrary, there is no creature in this great religious and wicked city more serious than I. Don't you know that levity is a sign of suffering, and that laughter is one of the attendants of madness? Besides, what I said was in no merely frivolous mood. You will find its spirit in the moral code of all men. I have, at least." He accompanied this defence with one of his dubious smiles, and then, darkening, he sighed profoundly.

"THAT," he resumed, "has been very like my code. That which right or wrong has borne hard upon my interests, I have resented. But, perhaps, we are all a little too hard upon De Beaumirail. If Ardenbroke says so, you may be pretty certain of it, for his infirmity is to form harsh judgments upon slender grounds; and he once said to me, 'for all I'm worth I would not see you married to a woman in whose happiness I felt an interest.'

"Why?" I asked, you may suppose, a little surprised, for we were at that time very intimate friends indeed. 'Because,' he answered, 'you are too severe a judge and, to this hour, he holds the same opinion. I can't help it, and I believe it does not hurt me very much, for I am not likely ever to find a human being care enough for me to make me her willing slave. A slave, indeed, I might be — that is possible, only too possible.

*'O she is dearer to my soul than rest.'*

Labour, danger, death, for the sake of one enchantress, would be welcome — and I such a martyr — such a fool!"

With a smile a little bitter and very melancholy, he rose and walked a few steps to a vase of flowers, which stood on the window-stone, and looked at the blossoms, as if he were reading their meaning in his reverie.

How was it that, as she leaned pensively on her hand in silence, scarcely breathing, those odd words, like music in a dream, trembled in her ears with a strange delight.

## PART III

### CHAPTER I.

#### A GUEST APPROACHES.

"How soon, Mr. Dacre, will your tiresome business end, and you become a little more your own master?" asked Mrs. Wardell.

"Is not that a cruel question," he replied, "seeing that its conclusion will be the signal for my departure?"

"Oh! It cannot be that," she said. "On the contrary, I fancy you would be the more likely to prolong your stay, having time to enjoy yourself, instead of being all day wearied over other people's business, and obliged to maintain your incognito. It must be so very tiresome."

"It is very tiresome. Nothing fatigues so much as disguise; as for me, the constraint under which I hourly find myself grows intolerable. I must, for the occasion, surround myself with as many precautions and artifices as if I were an escaped convict."

"You are not to make such horrid comparisons," said good Mrs. Wardell, "it certainly must be very distressing; but we have been very secret, haven't we, Laura, dear?"

"I can't take much merit to myself," said Laura, "for keeping a secret of which I really know nothing."

"Why Mr Dacre's name, we have not told that to anyone?" said Mrs. Wardell.

"I don't think Mr. Dacre will insist on that as a confidence. Ardenbroke knows it, and Charles Mannering, and that is pretty nearly all our gentlemen acquaintance in this part of the world, and of course he has not been more reserved with respect to other friends."

Dacre laughed, shook his head, and said, "I have been very reserved. There was no confidence with Ardenbroke, for he knows me, and recognized me at the opera; and though that was awkward, I can't think of that night except as the most fortunate of my life. And then as to Mr. Mannering, that I could not help — he was there, and what was I to do?"

"Does old Mr. Parker know you?" asked Laura.

"Old Mr. Parker, if he isn't too old by this time to recall the past, does know me, and will recollect my name with a start."

Dacre said this looking down on the carpet as he spoke with a smile that continued faintly to light up his face as he looked down, still in a reverie, long after his words had ceased.

"I can't say, however, that he's aware that I am in England; possibly De Beaumirail has told him. If he has he ought not, for he knows of my arrival only in the strictest confidence; but it matters very little. Poor old Parker, I fancy, if he is at all like what he used to be, knows probably no one except De Beaumirail, who is acquainted even with my name."

"And you don't very much like that old man?" said Laura Gray.

"Why do you say so?" asked Dacre, amused. To which question Laura instantly made this answer —

"If I said, Mr. Dacre, that it seems to me you don't like anyone very much, would not that be a reason for what I say?"

"Yes, logically; but is the fact so? So far from liking too little, there are people whom I like too well," said Mr. Dacre.

"See there — self-condemned!" exclaimed Miss Gray. "When you say you like too well, you mean better than they deserve; so that even these favourites are thrown into the general pit of depreciation."

"How ingenious you are, Miss Gray, and how cruel in exposing my weaknesses. Perhaps there was that little flaw — perhaps I do think too well of myself and too meanly of others, except in one case, which is my insanity."

"But to return to my old clergyman, whom you called a bore just now, you certainly don't like him," said Miss Gray.

"I never disliked him; but it is such a time ago that I can't exactly say what I thought of him, only I think I never cared about him, and I know that he disliked me extremely."

"Mr. Parker! why he seems to me one of the gentlest of human beings. What made you think so?"

"Because he has always been a most determined partisan of De Beaumirail's — a true narrow churchman, bigoted in all his ways, in his likings, in his antipathies, and utterly irrational. I never dreamed of anything in the case of De Beaumirail; but the more marked was my fairness and De Beaumirail's injustice — the brighter angel, he and I the blacker devil, according to good Mr. Parker, otherwise he is, I allow, a very good man. Not the less so, perhaps, in your opinion that he fears or rather hates me."

"I should so like to manage a little meeting between you!" said Laura Gray.

"Thanks," said he, "that is being very kind; but seriously the good old gentleman would be very good fun in such a situation, and I hope I need not assure you that I really do not bear him a particle of ill will."

"Well, that is fortunate," said Miss Gray.

"How comes it to deserve that character?" he replied.

"I say it is fortunate," she answered, "because I expect Mr. Parker here every minute."

"O really! Well I'm sure he'll not be annoyed. I can only say for myself I shall be most happy to meet him. I dare say he'll have forgotten me totally; but I'll undertake to amuse you by the process of recalling myself to his recollection. I'll remind him of things that will surprise him. At what hour was he to come?"

"At a quarter past nine; and it will be that, wont it, in a few minutes?" answered Laura Gray.

"In two minutes," he said, looking at his watch. "I hope he'll turn out to be the man, I recollect; but, indeed, as he's De Beaumirail's friend there can't be a doubt of that."

"He wrote a long letter to Laura; he says De Beaumirail is dying," said Mrs. Wardell.

"Dying, is he? I heard he was rather seedy; but dying — I had no idea of that," said Dacre.

"Oh, yes! so he says," continued Mrs. Wardell, "and he proposed looking in some day to have a talk with Laura."

"Yes," interposed Laura; "so, respecting the good old man, and liking him, although he does bore me, as you say, on one point, I asked him to come and dine with us to-day; but he could not, he said, having already promised to dine near this with a relation, so I told him to come to tea to us if he could, and he said we might expect him at a quarter past nine."

"He'll walk here, I suppose?" said Dacre, looking out of the window. "It is quite charming. It will be such a surprise and I venture to say you will see comedy and even farce when he comes."

Dacre seemed immensely amused by his thoughts and anticipations, and as he looked out into the darkness visible of a moonless night, the pane of glass reflected the lines of his strange smile.

Miss Gray was also looking from the window down that short broad avenue, at one side of which the lamps of Dacre's carriage shot their red rays under the branches.

"It is not easy to see out there tonight, Miss Gray. If the glass reflects the light in the room, you can see nothing," said Alfred Dacre.

"Yes, thanks. I have shut out the light very well with my hand," said the young lady. "I think I see — yes — there is some one walking up a little beyond your carriage. Yes, there is the shutting of the gate."

"Yes, I do see something tall — either Parker or a ghost — gliding up toward the lamps. Capital — bravo — we shall soon have him here, and — but, by Jove, I quite forgot that! What's to be done? It's awfully stupid of me. I should have remembered. It has just flashed on me, there is a way in which his seeing me may be highly injurious to the friend whom I have come to England to serve. I must say good night. Pray, don't for the world mention my name. I'll try to get away; but I am half afraid it is too late. Good night."

And Dacre, who had reached the door by this time, smiled and waved his adieux, and was gone.

"He'll meet him on the stairs, I think?" said Laura.

"Then he might as well have stayed a little longer, and helped us to entertain this old man you have brought here," said Julia Wardell. "For to tell you the truth, I don't know how we are to amuse him."

"Oh, my dear, it is his business to amuse us. He is coming up, and so, I daresay, is Mr. Dacre, for he must have met him."

## CHAPTER II.

### NEWS OF DACRE.

The moment Dacre got outside the drawingroom door, and closed it behind him, the smile died from his face. He ran down the broad stairs, looking at the hall-door, so soon as he had turned the corner of the second flight. In the hall he threw on his hat and cloak, and there hesitated, for he heard a step at the door, followed by a knock and a ring.

The door from the hall to the back stairs was open. The second door was closed; and into this short lobby, about eight feet deep, Alfred Dacre stepped, for he heard the approach of the servant to let in the visitor, whom he had resolved not to accost.

He had on that broadleaved felt hat (much more picturesque than the Jerries which have superseded them), and his cloak folded about him, and would have done very well for a serenading Spaniard in a melodrama. He was not much afraid that the old man, who was now admitted, would recognise him. Whether the consequence of that might be small or great, he stood back two or three steps, and looked out straight toward the hall.

Mr. Parker, walking slowly by, cast his eyes into this retreat, and saw Dacre, who confronted him with a stern carelessness. The old clergyman hesitated, looked hard and doubtfully at him, and then saying —

“I — I beg your pardon, sir,” he drew back, and walked upstairs.

Dacre laughed quietly to himself. Then again his mood changed, and he sighed deeply. At the foot of the stairs he paused with his hand on the banister, and he thought perhaps it would be as well to go up and have a talk with them all. But he shrugged and whispered, looking wistfully upward toward the drawingroom — “No, no — time enough. It is time I should change my tactique. I have always acted hand over head, and my impetuosity has driven me on a chevaux de frise often enough. Is any other man so torn and scarred as I? Let us, then, wait and think it over.”

Alfred Dacre was in the painful position of a man whose motive has failed him, and who finds, consequently, his hopes gliding into confusion, and his plans dissolving.

He walked out into the cool night air, and from under the boughs of the old trees he looked back on the drawingroom window. He leaned against the trunk of a tree — neither thinking, nor trying to think — simply undergoing as odd a vicissitude of feeling as ever agitated human breast.

“To one thing constant — never,” he said. “I wish I were a great deal better, or a little worse. If that old fellow recognised me, he is a wonder. Who knows what mischief he may do? Heaven knows what they are talking about up there by this time. I am strangely tempted to return to the drawingroom, and see it out. That simple old man — it would be comedy. I wonder what Miss Gray would think of it? “Would she laugh? She is so odd.”

He got into the carriage that was awaiting him.

“Yes,” he said with a sigh, “to be unapproachably beautiful — to be so eccentric — so resolute — so grave — and to be all this, and clever also, is to be very odd indeed! I have seen a good deal of life. Have I not lived in fairyland, and seen the Sirens? In all my experience of young-lady life, I have never met with any creature exactly like her. No, pretty Laura — no, Laura Challys Gray. How pretty her name is! Laura Challys Gray!”

He liked repeating it. Softly he said it again and again as they drove away. He sitting with his back to the horses, and looking with his head from the window toward the point from which he was receding; and when they passed the gate, and the glow of the windows was hidden from his eyes, he threw himself back with another great sigh, and was again in chaos.

“‘Mug in and mug out,’ as our Lancashire groom used to say,” thought Dacre.

“Shilly-shally” trumpets with uncertain sounds. Alfred Dacre detested the whole thing — oscillating characters, mixed motives, and divided duties, and closed his eyes impatiently on the present, not knowing in what mood an hour or two hence might find him.

It needs a shrewd man to know another. But did that man ever live who thoroughly knew a woman?

“If I allowed my fancy to run away with me, I might be in love with that girl before I could tell how it came to pass. As it is, that pretty phantom haunts me more than consists with my cold and scientific ideas. In some respects all the worse, in others all the better. The adventure interests me more pleasantly as I proceed.”

And this volatile person looked out gaily from the carriage window, and seemed already to have taken quite another view of his case.

About an hour after he had taken his departure, old Mr. Parker bid goodnight to the ladies, and departed also.

They had hardly enjoyed a five minutes’ talk, preliminary to going to their rooms, when the old clergyman returned — suddenly appearing at the drawingroom door. He looked very pale, and in a flurried way said —

“I beg pardon, Miss Gray; but some one is said to be in danger, I fear?”

“Who is it, sir — not me?” exclaimed Miss Gray, in whose apprehensions Dacre was present.

“A gentleman drank tea with you tonight?” asked Mr. Parker.

“Yes; he was going away exactly as you were coming up stairs. Do you mean him?”

“It can be no other.”

Laura grew pale.

“Pray tell me what it is,” she urged.

“As I went out at your gate, a tall gentleman, with a white waistcoat, smoking a cigar, walked up to me, and said, ‘You are Mr. Parker?’ and then added— ‘be so kind as to go back and inform Miss Gray that the gentleman who drank tea there, and left, I suppose, some little time ago, will be waylaid, and perhaps murdered, on his way into town. He had better be followed, and warned quickly. She will know what to do.’ And having said this, he began to smoke again, and walked away. I was sorry I did not stop him; but at the time I was so much surprised, and did not recollect myself for a little — and so I came back to tell you.”

“But he has been gone an hour or more,” said Miss Gray, distractedly ringing the bell.

“Can I be of any use, Miss Gray?” said the old gentleman.

“None, thanks — unless, perhaps, you would call at the police office, wherever it is, and tell them there.”

“I’ll inquire — I’ll make it out,” said Mr. Parker, and with a hurried goodnight, which Laura Gray scarcely heard, he took his departure.

She despatched two servants instantly; and after a considerable interval, they returned with no tidings. They had spoken with all the policemen they met upon the line of their route. But nothing had occurred, so far as they knew, to justify the warning. A visit to Miniver’s hotel resulted only in informing them that Mr. Dacre had not been there that day.

There was nothing farther to be done; and Laura Gray was very anxious.

## CHAPTER III.

### TWO LETTERS.

NEXT morning brought no tidings of Dacre.

"Of course we should have heard if anything had gone wrong," said Mrs. Wardell.

"Oh, yes — certainly. Don't you really think so?" answered Laura.

"Certainly," said Mrs. Wardell. "I think it was simply a hoax."

"I wish I could be sure of that," said she; "but I'm afraid it is all about that odious persecution that he will try to prevent. He is quite overmatched by their unscrupulous wickedness and craft, and I'm afraid it must end badly."

"Well, dear, you know I don't understand that affair at all, and I've given up trying to understand it; but if they are fools enough to write anonymous letters, I really think we are still greater fools to give ourselves trouble and run risks in trying to stop them."

"But there is more than that, dear Julia. I always act from impressions. I don't pretend to reason, but these people have acted in the most extraordinary way, and have gone to expense, and have been in this house, and minutely informed about all our sayings and doings, and they did make an attempt upon Mr. Dacre's life near Islington; and they have written with such malignity and even fury, I am sometimes half sorry I did not act on my own judgment entirely on ascertaining the identity of that frightful little Jew, but Mr. Dacre would have it otherwise, and Heaven only knows how it will all end."

"Nonsense, my dear, there's no one on earth would give twopence to hurt a hair of my old head, and I'm very sure they would be still less disposed to hurt you. I don't say I understand it, mind, for I confess I do not; but now that the Jew you mention as the ringleader of the whole thing has been found out, and probably knows that he is so, they are welcome to fire at Mr. Dacre or any other person if they dare."

"Whether we invite them, or not, they will make themselves welcome whenever it suits their purpose, unless the police be directed upon them; and why Mr. Dacre is so much against it I can't imagine. It seems to me so much more dangerous obviously to delay action, than it could possibly be to pursue and crush those wicked people. I suppose he will explain his reasons some time or other, but at present I confess his conduct seems to me perfectly inexplicable, and so absurdly rash; but I certainly will not allow it to go on any longer. I have had too much agitation and alarm, and if, with the evidence we can give, the law and police are not strong enough to reach them, this is plainly no country for honest people to live in."

Laura Gray was in miserable spirits. Julia Wardell could see how nervous and wretched she was, though she did not talk, perhaps, as much as other girls under the same pressure would have done.

Noon came and passed, and no message had yet come to relieve the suspense of friends at Guildford House. Miss Gray was growing more and more miserable as the day wore on. One o'clock came; two o'clock, and still no tidings. Luncheon was for Miss Gray a mere make-belief, though Mrs. Wardell did not fail to show her a good example. The elder lady proposed a drive, but Laura excused herself.

The servant returned for a second time that day from Miniver's hotel with the same barren answer to inquiries respecting Mr. Dacre. No one had called there to inquire for his letters since yesterday morning, and no news of him had reached them. This seemed to Miss Gray a dismaying circumstance.

At three o'clock the postman brought two letters, or more properly notes — one from the Silver Dragon, written rather tremulously by Charles Mannering.

He did not seem to be doing so well, and complained that his doctor had placed him under stricter rule, and that he was practising a fraud upon him in writing this little note of his health. It was certainly on the whole an unsatisfactory bulletin.

The other note was from Alfred Dacre, and was as follows: —

"Mr *dear* Miss Gray, — I write lest any accident should prevent my paying my respects in person this evening, to tell you that there occurred a kind of crisis of a very bold and unexpected kind in the machinations of our tormentors, that by favour of an accident — a rather hairbreadth one — the -affair totally broke down, and that I hope to lay at your feet the fruits of our victory. My old friend Mr. Parker I observed looked very hard at me last night, with the eye of a man who fancied he had seen me before, but he failed to recognise me, which I was rather glad of, as his talking, ever so little, in a certain quarter, might, in a roundabout way, injure some people in whom I am a great deal interested. I shall say more when I have the honour of seeing you. Believe me, my dear Miss Gray, ever yours sincerely, — "ALFRED DACRE."

That was all, but so far as it went it tallied unpleasantly with the message of that smoking man last night in the white waistcoat, who had confided his alarm to Mr. Parker.

In Challys Gray's mind there lurked a dreadful suspicion that the attempt of which the person at the gate had apprized the old clergyman, had in part succeeded. Was Alfred Dacre hurt in his Quixotic enterprise on her behalf?

The cynic viewing Miss Challys Gray's conventual project in the light of cold experience and hard results, might in that case enjoy his bleak smile over the ruins of — not a castle — but a convent, in the air.

Peace had she sought. Well, here were her only two visitors, she might say — each laid in bloodstained bandages, on a bed of pain, if not of danger, and each in consequence of being associated by these visiting relations with her. So much for monastic peace. What of her conventual platonic? Had not a stranger stolen into her heart? Was there not a phantom in her pretty head — a fancy hardly suspected till now, and now almost detected as — a passion? Alas for that gray ivy-mantled monastery. The mirage is mist, and she in the desert. Nothing of all her dream remains but — solitude.



She is restless, she is silent — from the window she goes to the piano — but the music sounds wild, and pains her heart with the thrill of a reproach. To the flowers she goes, turning them over in the vase with her pretty finger tips. But the blossoms and the odour were melancholy.

“Julia,” she said.

Julia Wardell was working at her crochet-needles as usual, and the invalid dog had been removed from her bedroom to a cushion on the sofa, by her side, for change of air.

“Well, dear?” replied the old lady, pushing up her spectacles.

“Do you take any interest in Mr. Dacre?” resumed Laura.

“How, my dear — what do you mean?” inquired good Mrs. Wardell.

“Do you care whether he is dead or alive?” asked Laura, with suppressed impetuosity.

“Dead or alive! — what can you mean by asking such a question? — why of course I do.”

“Well, then, hadn’t you better send to inquire?” demanded Miss Gray.

“Where! darling?”

“To Miniver’s hotel — I’m not going to send again. Indeed, I think you might have thought of it this morning,” answered Miss Gray.

“Well, so I should, I dare say, only you thought of it first — but shall I send?” replied the old lady.

“If you wish,” persisted Challys. “I’m not going to send every time, and the house is full of useless men, with nothing to do.”

“Well, I think, yes, it would be kind; but I have no doubt he is quite well.”

“If you don’t like,” said Challys, with a brighter colour and a flash in her eyes, “you need not do it. It is only to ring the bell, and tell them to go.”

“Yes, indeed,” said Mrs. Wardell, glancing through the window to the sky, and getting up, “and a walk will do them nothing but good.”

So she marched over to the bell, and touched it, as Miss Gray sat down at the piano, and once more struck its chords, and played away so spiritedly, that when the man entered, in reply to the bell, Mrs. Wardell had to signal to him to approach more nearly, to enable her, without inconvenience, to give him her commission.

## CHAPTER IV.

### SOMETHING HAS HAPPENED.

THIS messenger returned, however, like the other, without tidings. Mr. Dacre had not yet, that day, sent for his letters. No one had called from him, and they could tell nothing whatever about him.

So then, patience, the great palliative, and "time the consoler," were all that remained to the friends of Mr. Dacre at Guildford House.

I cannot tell how Laura Gray felt — she was silent. Lamps by this time were lighted in the drawingroom. There was a book open before her; but the window was also open, and her eyes were often raised to it, and she silently listening. I think she had opened the volume at page 159, and after half an hour's quiet reading the book was still open at page 159.

"You'll be glad to hear he's better, my dear," said Julia Wardell, entering the room suddenly.

"How do you know?" inquired Laura, turning quickly.

"By his eating some chicken, my dear. I only hope he hasn't eaten too much," answered Mrs. Wardell.

"Oh, that's very nice," said Laura Gray, blushing intensely, and glad that she was not suspected.

"Yes; I always know when the darling little soul is really feeling better, by his eating chicken," said Julia, seating herself again at her work. "I think it was wise my sending him to his little bed in my room. It would have been very bad — he takes his medicine at nine — disturbing him so late as halfpast ten, till he's quite well, of course: and now he's only come here — wasn't he? — to his own little sofa, in his drawingroom, for half an hour."

"Hush! — the gate! — listen!" said Laura Gray, looking toward the window, breathless, with her lips parted.

"Yes, it is the gate, and now — yes, here it is," and a carriage, with lamps burning, drove up to the hall-door.

Laura drew a long breath, and began to read her book, and turn over the leaves diligently, and now there were steps on the stairs, and she felt herself growing pale. The door opened, and the servant announced "Mr. Dacre."

In the momentary interval her heart seemed to cease beating, and as the name was pronounced it fluttered up with a sudden bound, as if it would suffocate her. She felt quite wild with the sense of relief.

What did Alfred Dacre see? He saw Miss Gray pale and cold, looking down on her book as if too much interested to look up.

"Laura, dear, — Mr. Dacre," said Mrs. Wardell.

"Oh, Mr. Dacre?" and Laura looked up smiling, and gave him a very cold hand.

"I was half afraid I shouldn't have been able to come tonight; and I'm so happy; but I hope you are quite well."

She was looking very pale — paler than he had thought when he first came in, and there was a little brilliant hectic in each cheek.

"Quite well, thanks. I've been looking into this book, and it is so dull, and it is very good of you coming. I don't know how we should have got through this evening."

"And we have been in such a fright about you," interposed Mrs. Wardell.

"Really," said he, and glanced at Laura's face, to which came the prettiest blush in the world.

"Well, I don't know hardly that," she said, trying to assent herself; "we heard some foolish story, and it would have been too provoking, you know, if your so goodnaturedly looking in upon us should have exposed you to any annoyance from those ill-disposed people who, I am afraid, are watching you. What was it, Julia? Tell Mr. Dacre exactly what we heard."

Mrs. Wardell with eager volubility recounted the odd little alarm of last evening, told the story of their exertions in his behalf, and described the young man who gave the warning, and then declared their thanks and obligations.

For the first time a frown darkened Dacre's face; he seemed to wince at some recollection, and impatiently and even harshly said —

"I disdain thanks. I do what I like for my own sake. I like every one to treat me as an enemy. I mean as to my motives, to assume that I am selfish."

He paused suddenly, as if startled at his own words.

"You are very peremptory with me, Mr. Dacre," replied Julia Wardell, with a surprised look; "but you know it would be very unusual not to thank people who are really kind to us."

"Oh, yes. I did not mean to address what I said to — to, in fact, to any one in particular. I meant merely to express my belief about people's motives, and to say I'm no better than others, and no worse either," he added, almost fiercely.

He saw Miss Gray's fine eyes looking upon him with a gaze of surprise, almost of alarm. His own eyes dropped to the floor, and after a moment or two he raised them again with an odd smile.

"I'm sure there is something oriental in my blood," he said. "I'm so prone to exaggeration, my friends will mitigate my hyperboles, and even understand the feelings that impel me into them."

"Well, if you won't allow us to thank you," said Mrs. Wardell, a little huffed, "or at least receive our thanks so oddly —"

"Pray excuse me; it is not ingratitude," he said; "but I'm not very happy, and my vehemence is rather the expression of pain than of thought; thinking is an exercise that never was my forte."

"Why thinking? You must think, Mr. Dacre; is not that the attribute of the human race?" said Julia Wardell, who did not know what to make of him.

"One grows sometimes impatient and disgusted with one's own folly, and incensed at one's malignant luck, and what a man says who is stung with anger and delirious with his wounds is all chance, and of course counts for nothing. I am sure I owe an apology; but how is one to make it if one does not remember what one has said? All I can say, Mrs. Wardell, is, that if I talked nonsense I know you'll forgive me, and if worse I beg your pardon a thousand times."

"Well, what you said was — what was it? It has really gone out of my head, but it does not in the least matter; and this I am quite sure of, that you said nothing that needed an apology."

"That's very kind of you, Mrs. Wardell."

"And I'm so glad you are come," she continued. "You can't have a notion how dull we are, and how we miss your music when you don't come; and you'll be glad to hear, for you like dogs, that my poor little creature is ever so much better to-day." Dacre, I'm afraid, did not hear all this. As the old lady was speaking he came to Laura's side, and while Mrs. Wardell entered into conversation with her dog, he stooped over the young lady. At a little distance you would have fancied he was looking into the book that lay open before her, and he said very low —

"I hope I did not speak ungraciously, Miss Gray; there is nothing so sweet as being thanked by you; but you are not to thank me. When, if ever, I do a service worthy of such a reward, and the only one I can ever do will tear my heart asunder, then I may claim it, but not now."

"As usual, Mr. Dacre, you speak enigmas," said Laura; "but notwithstanding all you say I am obliged to you for coming tonight. We had heard what made us very uncomfortable, and I am sure you have something to tell me."

"Why do you think so?" he asked, as if he shrank from it.

"Don't you think one might guess from the things you have said that you have something unusual to tell?" said she.

"Yes, I dare say. I'm sure I have been talking like a fool." He laughed more in his old way. "I was going to say a very vain thing — I was going to say I had been talking very unlike myself; but, Miss Gray, I don't regret anything. If all this meanness and villainy had not been practised, I should not now have been here. I don't regret the price that buys that privilege for me; and cost what more it may, I'll retain it as long as I can endure the melancholy agony of that happiness."

A look of surprised uncertainty in Miss Gray's large eyes suddenly met his own.

"I see I've been talking more enigmas; half our riddles have really no answers to them. I should be very much puzzled I know to explain my own dark sayings. It is much easier to speak in an unknown tongue than to interpret." And as he concluded this little speech his old manner returned; he laughed, and Miss Gray felt reassured.

"Well, you are to tell me," she said, "whether anything has happened."

"A great deal," he said.

"Wont you tell me what it is?"

"People have repented."

"Incorrigibly oracular this evening," said Miss Laura Gray.

"Bitterly — bitterly — life-long repentance. Before I tell you anything I must exact a distinct promise," he said.

They were still talking in an undertone, and Julia Wardell, conversing affectionately still with her lap-dog, was not in their way. "Say what it is," asked Miss Gray.

"It is that you wont thank me."

"Not thank you? Then I am sure you have done me some great kindness," said Miss Gray.

"Something has happened, but there is — nothing — not the least kindness — so pray allow me to insist on my condition," persisted Alfred Dacre.

"It is delightful to thank people, and very hard to be denied, and very difficult, too, to keep such a promise."

"You don't know, Miss Gray, how much you torture me. I thought my request an humble one enough, and 'yet you wont grant it.'"

"I'm so curious that I must grant it; and, if I appear very rude and unkind, remember who compelled me to be so."

"Only promise that you'll never thank me."

"Never! Why, you're becoming more and more exacting!" exclaimed Miss Laura Gray.

"Never thank me," he repeated.

"Well, you know I'm in a corner, and I can't escape, and I'm too curious to wait; so I believe there is nothing for it but to promise," said Miss Gray.

"Well, Miss Gray, you are not to say thank you," repeated Dacre.

"Then, as it must be so, I wont say thank you; and now you are to tell me what it is."

"I had some doubts," he answered, "as to whether I should bring it myself; in fact," he continued, with a momentary look of pain and dejection, "it was a struggle; it is a vile swindle, but I can't help it, and here it is — and I'll never touch it more." With these words he placed in her hand a large sealed envelope addressed to her in his own hand. A melancholy look he fixed on her for a moment; she gazed upward in his eyes, expecting him to speak, and I think he was on the point of doing so, but changed his mind, and went instead to the piano and sat down, and there played snatches of old, wild, and melancholy airs; so Miss Gray broke the seal of the envelope and examined its contents.

## CHAPTER V.

### LAURA READS.

The letter instantly rivetted her attention, for the hand was the same bold and peculiar one which had written the villainous letters which had so perplexed and affrighted her. She gasped a sudden exclamation of amazement, and began to read.

"Can you sing us that charming little song again tonight, Mr. Dacre?" asked Mrs. Wardell, whom the tones of the piano recalled from a reverie. "'Come to me,' you know, 'when daylight sets;' is not that it?"

"I'm afraid, — thank you very much for wishing it, — but I'm afraid I've got a little cold, and I would not for the world be a failure, having had so very kind a reception," said he, not caring just then to sing.

"A cold! dear me, I'm so sorry. Let me advise you to try one of these lozenges. I find them very good when my voice is affected."

Very gratefully he declined, and she continued —

"Indeed, I think there is some kind of influenza attacking every one just now. I've had it slightly, like you; and here is my poor little miserable creature here suffering from his chest, so oppressed at times you could hear him breathing where you're sitting now. I'm not half satisfied with the advice I've got — no, indeed, we are not, my poor little darling soul — and I was going to ask you, Mr. Dacre, if you understand anything of the treatment of dogs; I should be so much obliged if you'd allow me to consult you."

"I should be only too happy, if you really wish it; but, I ought to tell you that I have not very much experience, and have not been fortunate. In fact, I never treated more than one dog, and he died, and it was thought, poor fellow, I accidentally poisoned him."

"Oh, indeed! Oh, I see; but you must have been awfully pained."

"Yes, so we were, the dog and I; but he, poor fellow, got out of his pain first: and I'm only too happy to obey you, and at least I can promise that if I should be so unhappy as to poison another dog, it shan't be with the same thing."

"Well, thanks, there's time enough; we can see how he is tomorrow," said good Mrs. Wardell, a little frightened.

All this time, as he played lightly or talked, he was looking over the piano, and watching Miss Gray, who was reading this paper, It said —

"I write to acknowledge the offence we have committed, and that still worse which we meditated. I have placed in Mr. Alfred Dacre's hands a signed confession, on the condition that no one sees it, unless we violate our undertaking, hereby entered into, that we shall give you no more trouble. It is understood, on the other hand, that you give us none, unless we break this engagement."

"The locket set with brilliants which we sent at first you will please to purchase at 70l, which sum we have agreed you may distribute among such public charities as you select; and the acknowledgment of the same, by advertisement in the Times, we accept as payment of said sum. This being accepted as a settlement of all complaints, claims, or possible litigations on account of past occurrences, we withdraw, and unless recalled by a departure from those stipulations, we shall appear no more."

"Oh, what a relief! That gallant friend. What do I not owe him?"

Her eyes spoke all this as she raised them in silent delight from the paper, and fixed them for a moment on that handsome musician, who lowered his at the same moment to the notes, and seemed absorbed in the tangled maze of a half-forgotten air.

He saw that her eyes stole again toward him, and he said —

"I think, Mrs. Wardell, I could sing a little, if you still command me. I fancy my voice is better. May I try, Miss Gray?"

"Certainly. We are always so much obliged," she answered with alacrity.

Mrs. Wardell seconded the proposal, and Alfred Dacre sang more exquisitely than ever.

Thanked and -approved by his goodnatured little audience, Alfred Dacre got up and crossed the room to Laura Gray's side.

She knew that his song had been sung for a purpose. She felt that he was quite in earnest when he told her not to thank him; and this song he had interposed like a dream, that the grateful impulse might have time to cool, and she to remember and observe her promise.

She held up the envelope in her fingers, with the light of triumph and gratitude in her eyes.

"You are to keep that," he said, "and name it no more. If there's anything in it you don't understand you have only to ask me. Otherwise pray never mention it to me."

"I'm so delighted!" she looked in his face, smiling.

He smiled — but it was with an effort — and the wintry light quickly faded away, and left behind a look of pain and annoyance.

"I'm very glad — that is, that you are pleased," said Dacre.

"And aren't you?"

"I say I'm glad that you are glad," said he, a little impatiently.

"But aren't you pleased to see this?" She held up the envelope again.

"No," said he.

"No? I'm sure you do like to look at it."

Miss Laura Gray teased him, but I am sure it was her curiosity that prompted.

"Miss Gray, pray believe me. I look at it with a disgust and horror which you can't conceive. Of which it would give you but a faint idea to suppose yourself compelled to look in the face of a corpse, or anything else which most repulses you.

Pray, lock it up, and try to put it out of your mind — for you'll never have trouble from that quarter more."

Laura looked at him, and saw that he was profoundly pained. So after a little silence, she mentioned another subject, though not a very remote one.

"I dare say you have seen Mr. De Beaumirail since?"

"That is a subject, Miss Gray, that I thought you objected to," said Alfred Dacre.

"I don't like speaking of him — that is very true — but I have a vague idea that he knew something of this."

And she glanced at the envelope still in her fingers.

"You are perfectly right," said he; "I'm sure of it."

"And how was it?" she asked.

"I can't tell. You'll kindly not ask me to discuss it — but I hate and despise him more than ever."

"I have no reason to like him," she said. "Few people, I fancy, had," said Dacre, "though, as I have often said, I am the person he injured most; perhaps the only one whom he injured seriously."

"Do you know his history?"

"Yes; very well."

"You know he treated my family very ill," she said.

"I think I know what you allude to, Miss Gray," he said, in a tone of melancholy respect. "But I believe upon that one point you are entirely mistaken. Ardenbroke and I have talked that painful matter over more than once."

"Ah!" said she bitterly, "the fickle, odious, cruel coward, can the other world send up a viler soul than the man who trifles with that sacred feeling, and kills a poor creature by that slow torture?"

Alfred Dacre, with downcast eyes, was listening respectfully.

Miss Gray went on with sudden excitement —

"I've often wished that I were a man, that I might have let him go free, and fought him — to strike down that cold villain with a pistol shot, or die by his — and let him lay death upon death, and go to judgment with a double murder. Ardenbroke and you — and you and Ardenbroke — with your metaphysics, and your partisanship, and your cruelty! To break a girl's heart is but the breaking of a china tea-cup. What's a woman? The plaything of your insolence. What her love? A song to laugh over. The feather of your vanity. But I say, the noblest treasure that ever God poured out on earth! Oh, manhood! Oh for the time when men were men, and honoured the creatures whom nature committed to their protection. But, oh, that's all oldfashioned now — entirely mistaken — and men are wiser; and women must be patient — yes, patient — till God's justice comes to rule the world."

Alfred Dacre was taken aback, as the phrase is, by the sudden vehemence of Challys Gray. Still looking down, he waited —

"Entirely mistaken, say you and Ardenbroke? You put your heads together, and wonder why such a fuss about a girl's fancies, and pity De Beaumirail; and then, with a shrug or two, turn over to some other folly. But I tell you, show me the man who in such a matter practises the least duplicity, or even thinks deceit, and I see a villain."

Was there anything in these generalities that Dacre applied for himself? There was a vengeful light for the moment in Challys Gray's eyes; and his, with a dilated gaze, met hers — he looked white as a ghost — stem and resigned, and after a brief gaze, he lowered his eyes to the ground.

"I don't understand people's motives, or much, I'm afraid, about right and wrong," said he at last. "I don't understand human nature, because I can't, to begin with, understand myself. But, dear Miss Gray, don't we walk in such a mist? I mean with ideas frequently so clouded, when we are ourselves concerned — in a region so haunted by illusions, and with a vision so feeble, that even when we most wish to be fair, we follow shadows and lose our way?"

Miss Gray was silent, looking sadly out on the darkness.

"And although I have quite misconveyed my real feelings about that particular circumstance, and although I was unfortunate enough to incur a portion of your censure, I yet am glad that I was present — very glad, for many reasons. Your feelings I can understand, and respect and admire them, more than I can describe, and I shan't make the least attempt at present to talk in extenuation of myself and Ardenbroke; but we have been misapprehended, and any time you command me to explain, I shall only be too grateful."

A little pause followed, and he came beside Miss Gray, and very low he said— "Yes; I am very glad, although some of what you said pained me acutely — very glad that I was here, because I feel, Miss Gray, that I know you better, and that, in spite of all, you trust me more."

And so there came another little silence.

## CHAPTER VI.

### A STORY.

HAPPY Julia Wardell! Happy in your invincible placidity. What nerves! How charmingly organized for the uses of a chaperon. Not quite "hard of hearing," but slightly muffled and indistinct, and so luxuriously prone to slumber! And happy Challis Gray in a companion so habitually floating away into dreamland, and so cheerfully ready at call to return. Lord Ardenbroke used to laugh at a chaperon so admirably chosen. Challis Gray and Mr. Dacre had both forgotten her existence for some minutes, and, in fact, her existence was not just then for them. In tranquil visions she at that moment nodded, making superb double chins, among the clouds; her worsteds on her lap, and one crochet-needle on the floor.

Alfred Dacre perceived the state of things, and was secretly happy. Challis Gray, too, knew it somehow, and did not care to disturb it. Then Alfred Dacre said, more like himself —

"In an old garden, that I loved when I was a boy — the picturesque may have had something to do with it — but it had the best gooseberries I ever eat; there were two time-honoured sun-dials, with fluted urnshaped stems, stained gray and green with mosses. They had inscriptions: one said 'we must — the thing itself supplying the hiatus, die-all, thus telling of the sleep that brings an end of pain; and his brother answered *tempus fugit* — time flies — telling us to make all we can of the hour that is upon the wing. These solemn old dials preached. They could do little else, for the ancient standard fruit-trees had grown into a forest, and the sun seldom touched them; and so, as my mood varies, as hope comes or despair, I find myself again in the twinkling shadow, and read the old lesson 'we must,' or else *tempus fugit*, and life's again a comedy."

One or more of those precious minutes sped away in silence.

"One thing puzzles me," said Miss Gray, looking up from a little reverie, "and that is, what the pleasure of concealing one's antecedents, as the Americans say, one's surroundings, history, and individuality, can possibly be."

Dacre laughed.

"Why do you laugh?"

"Because I'm pleased. I think you are doing me a great honour. I venture to think that when you say all that, you are so good as to mean me."

"I do mean you. But I don't think it was fair to make me say so in direct terms; discussion is embarrassed by it."

"But this must not," said Dacre, with one of his gay laughs.

"I was not going to say anything very severe, however," said she.

"I ought to be very grateful, for I must allow on this point no man is more open to attack," said Dacre.

"I was only going to say, in a general way, I wonder why people are so secret. We ought to be very well acquainted by this time, and yet you are a total stranger to me."

"How do you know? I may have been watching over you ever since you were a child, in quite another shape," said he.

She looked at him, and he at her, and after his wont he laughed.

"If people choose to be secret, let them be secret, there is always a reason — but it is not always a wrong one. Suppose their mystery the talisman, not only of their happiness, but of their safety."

"But why should innocent people require to pass themselves off for other persons?"

"Innocent people are liable to be injured by people who are not innocent; and it is sometimes very desirable to mystify them; but that is not my case. I have been acting strictly in the interest of others."

"But then that kind of mystery defeats itself," said she.

Dacre looked sharply at her.

"How?" said he.

"Why, it makes people so curious."

"And our first mother fell by her curiosity," said Dacre, with a faint smile and a shrug.

"Well, yes, so she did, but it was acted on by the serpent, and ended by her prying and —

"Perishing," said Dacre.

"Very well — yes — that shows how dangerous it is to trifle with."

"And why do I trifle with it — isn't that the question?"

"Yes, because once it is thoroughly aroused, it is sure to carry all before it," answered Miss Gray.

"Not always, and when it does — better it hadn't, often," said he, with a laugh. "I'll tell you a story. I wish I could think where I read it." He began again, "May I try to tell it?"

"Pray do."

"Once on a time a young Irish earl — I forget his title, but we'll look in Debrett — lived very solitary in a great old castle among the cliffs by the seaside. One night as he sat reading all alone a little white rat appeared on his table, and looked up in his face very winningly. He rather took a fancy to it — it looked so gentle — and next night just in the same way it appeared again. Lonely creatures easily become friends, and the earl and the little white rat grew fonder and fonder each of the other, and he tied a little ribbon of blue, the colour of true love, about its neck, and it slept on his pillow, and never left him day or night. Do I tire you?"

"No, pray go on."

"This faithful little rat was always with him, till some friends came to pay him a visit at his castle. To them this mutual attachment was capital fun; and the Irish earl, who was a sensitive man, felt their ridicule acutely, and fiercely frightened away the little white rat as often as it appeared, which was a sad thing for both, for the earl sometimes reproached himself nearly as much as the little white rat seemed to suffer. But for the present it ended as I am about to tell you. I am afraid it is very long—"

"I assure you I like it extremely. Pray go on," said Miss Gray.

"He and these visitors had to depart together for England, and as the earl crossed the plank into the ship the little white rat ran before his feet. His friends laughed, of course, and the thin-skinned earl, in a frenzy of cowardice, kicked it into the sea, in which with a splash and a squeak it disappeared. So ends Fytte the first. May I go on?"

"Pray do," said she. "Though your sensitive earl, now bereft of the odd society which suited him best, is not an interesting person, I should still like to know how he fared."

"He returned to his castle, melancholy and solitary, and missed the little white rat, but it did not come. Months passed away? and at last came the long nights, winds, and wintry weather. One night it was blowing hard and very dark as he satiate in his library, when on a sudden he heard a gun at sea, and another, and another. It was plain there was a ship in distress. With all his faults this earl had courage and goodnature, and with a few stout rowers he was soon pulling seaward, guided now and then by the glare of the gun over sky and sea, in the most heroic danger. He could now see dimly the outline of a great oldfashioned ship labouring in the sea, lighted up now and then in the blaze of its own cannon. Before they could reach it, however, the ship went down. But something was left floating where she sank, which with an effort they got into the boat, and found a lady in a white dress, and, as it seemed, lifeless. Not till they reached the castle she recovered slowly. She spoke a foreign language which nobody knew, but picked up English very soon, and the end of it was that he fell in love, and could think only of her. He asked her often about the ship she came in — her family, her home, and country, and also why she always wore a broad velvet band about her throat. But upon all this she was silent, and grew so melancholy whenever he asked that at length he ceased to inquire, and ventured but one question more; he asked her — to marry him. The lady consented, but exacted a promise in return. He was never more to inquire into those mysteries on which she had implored his forbearance. So the promise was given, they were married, and they lived in perfect love, and the glory of their enchanted beatitude was darkened only by this one reserve. I think I've put Mrs. Wardell to sleep — have I?"

"Never mind — she nods and wakens like Homer — she will be all the brighter for this momentary eclipse. Pray go on," said Miss Gray.

"Well, it is nearly ended — all was serenity and sunshine. But still the earl had his own trouble — the unsatisfied curiosity on which his lips were sealed. When one morning early, standing by his wife's bedside, as she lay asleep, with her throat uncovered, his eye rested on the broad band of black velvet. The temptation was irresistible, for her scissors hung on her chatelaine at the bed's side, so he clipped the black velvet across, and he saw around her throat beneath it a blue ribbon, as with a wild cry his wife started up in the bed. At the same moment something jumped on the floor, and, looking down, he saw the little white rat with the blue ribbon round its neck run across the room, and again looking back he saw the bed untreasured of its mistress, and neither she nor the little white rat was ever again beheld in that lonely lord's castle. So ends the story. It is Bluebeard's moral, you see, a little more tenderly conveyed."

"I'm too much obliged to you, Mr. Dacre, to quarrel with your moral at present."

"No, Miss Gray, as I said before, you are not obliged to me. I think you made me a promise?"

"Yes, so I did. Well, I'm not a bit obliged to you — if so it must be — but recollect I've not promised to aid in mystifying myself."

"How do you mean, Miss Gray?"

"I mean," she laughed, "that if I can, I'll find it all out."

"No; I'm sure you'll not try."

"And, pray, why should I not?"

"Because you said you wished to thank me."

"So I do," said she.

"Well, Miss Gray, let your silence thank me. Spare me all inquiry. In a very little time, I may tell you everything. I know you are jesting, but I am grave enough, and mean what I say. In the meantime, think no more of it. Sufficient unto the day, you know — and the day will come."

"Not an evil day, I hope?" she said merrily.

"Good or evil," said he, "who can look into futurity? For me, it grows darker than ever — a darkness in which, as they say, I cannot see my own hand."

"But there are some things one can foresee?" pleaded Laura, gaily.

"One's breakfast; yes — but there's a haze even over that; more over dinner; and so you find yourself in dense fog before you have well set out on your excursion into next week."

"Yes; of course there are all the uncertainties that depend upon sickness and death?" she said.

"And change?" he added sadly.

"Oh, yes; but change comes slowly," said she.

He shook his head.

"Suddenly sometimes," he said.

"Well, yes — material changes; houses may fall flat in a moment; ships blow up; old gentlemen drop down in apoplexys," began Laura.

"No, no; I mean quite honestly," said he.

"How do you mean?" asked Miss Gray.

"I mean it quite fairly, that minds change in a moment."

"Oh, you mean a whim? I don't think a whimsical person has a mind at all," said Miss Gray, and looked for a moment a little hard at him; and she added, "I think, Mr. Dacre, somehow, there is always *a* suspicion of a conundrum in what you say?"

"And myself the subject of the riddle?" he laughed. "Well no, I was not, for *a* moment, thinking of myself, but quite another person's case, in which the mind, as you say, changed like a trick in a pantomime; all happened in *a* moment; a great affection, struck with the lightning of *a* single word, was killed. I saw it — it was quite irrevocable — and often recurs wamingly to my recollection."

“Your recollections seem generally very happy, Mr. Dacre,” said she; “a great deal happier, I fancy, than mine.”

“If my memory is always in high spirits, it is the worst sign of my life. The more celestial the life, the sadder the memory. I can quite understand why your retrospect is toned with melancholy.”

Laura Gray was looking out vaguely on a landscape painted with black on the darkest gray, with a few small stars glimmering intensely in the little piece of sky straight above them. He thought, as he looked, that he saw a clear blush steal over her cheek, and a listening smile just traceable on her lip; but of her eyes he could see only the long silken fringes.

How pretty that stolen smile — that pleased blush — how beautiful he thought her!



## CHAPTER VII.

### STRANGE MUSIC.

“DOES she like me?” he thought, with a strange struggle at his heart, as he looked on that beautiful vision; “oh, does she like me — is it possible?”

Was it possible? What is impossible in the land of love — that world of illusions, recklessness, and miracles; and was he not conscious of his romantic beauty, and of that sad celestial tenor in which trembled the spirit of regret and passion; and had he not other fascinations also?

Mr. Dacre was one of those conceited persons who never in ordinary cases question their powers of conquest. He had but to obtain access to Guildford House, and where he chose to direct those subtle and romantic influences, imagination must be dazzled, and hearts enslaved.

But this confidence belonged to the man who was himself indifferent. As an interest quite new to him began insensibly to steal into his heart, a scepticism, also new, began to affright him. The serpent who, we suppose, approaches to charm its prey with the peculiar spell of its eye, is encountered by a more potent charm, and becomes itself enthralled under the superior fascination of a basilisk.

Let us beg Mr. Dacre’s pardon for so sinister a mythologic parallel. We who watch his operations are at liberty to form what conjecture we please. Of one thing only we are certain in the situation — if he has lost any part of his confidence or his liberty, he has succumbed not to design, but to a power, and he has been made acquainted with some of those sincerities which he had overlooked in his own character.

This man, hitherto so confident of success, was now elated, or trembled at every look of hers, and wondered at his own secret agitations. He was angry with himself for abdicating his superiority, and often disdainfully vowed to reassert it. Dacre had grown out of some of the conceit of very early days. Still he had enough left to feel at times his pride wounded by his situation, and still more so by his entire uncertainty as to whether he had made the slightest impression even upon her fancy.

He took a chair close by her, and he said — “How you like looking through that window into the dark. I have observed you do so, Miss Gray, so often — and yet you complain of mystery.”

“As if everything was not a mystery,” she said, still looking out with the same smile and a little sigh — “yes, everything.”

“Everything beautiful, Miss Gray, I’ve felt it so; and there are mysteries which to me, I am sure, are better *still* mysterious — I mean, I should rather bear uncertainty than incur a danger of despair.”

“Despair is a very grand word, Mr. Dacre, and belongs to tragedy, and epic poems, and theology.”

“Yes; and is not one’s own life and experience the vital fountain from which we draw the life of every epic? Theology; yes, every man, even the sceptic, has a theology of his own — and oh, Miss Gray, why smile at tragedy, *whose* life is all a comedy? Mine has long had nothing in it but — the sort of dolorous ingredient you laugh at.”

“I think you are very ungrateful to talk so,” said Miss Gray.

“Ungrateful! To whom?” asked Dacre. “To Heaven,” she answered. “It is so much a habit with people to talk in that discontented way, all in the wantonness of luxury and ingratitude. I dare say, Mr. Dacre, girl as I am, I have had more to grieve me than ever you have; but I believe it is only we who suffer from that kind of grief: your nobler sex is, people say, quite above that kind of folly — grieving, I mean, for other people.”

“I wish, Miss Gray, you did not think quite so meanly of me,” he said sadly, with something imploring in his great eyes.

“Not you; no, I ought not to have included you. It was very ungrateful of me — I don’t indeed,” she said quickly.

She was looking eagerly in his face, blushing very much. Her lips were parted, and he could just see the little glimmering edge of her tiny teeth, as for a moment she gazed on him with this beautiful glow of earnestness: and then she looked from the window again, and her eyes dropped, but the blush continued.

“Miss Gray,” he said very low, “some time or other I shall be able, and you will permit me, to tell you something of my life — now, I *can’t*. But you’ll see then, you will, indeed, how full of grief and pride and folly it has been. You will see the bad, and you will see, also, the good. You’ll think me wicked — but you’ll see I can be noble; and you’ll see how I have — adored you.”

He was very pale, with the light of intense excitement in his eyes. He took her hand and held it in both his.

The colour fled from her cheeks, and she returned his passionate gaze with a strange look, one that was very melancholy, but which also had fear in it. She looked on the point of bursting into tears.

A moment more, and still it was a pale, steadfast gaze that she fixed on him. He fancied he read in it an agony of doubt. This white stare of wonder and fear continued for some seconds, but her hand remained unresistingly locked in his.

“I did not dream of saying this when I came here. If it seems insane and audacious, at least it was not premeditated; it was just that I have grown to adore you, and — it was irrepressible.”

Still not a word from Challys Gray, but her hand lay quite passively in his.

“Oh, Challys, darling, will you say nothing?”

Challys only pressed her other hand to her temple, and with a great sigh she whispered —

“It seems all a dream — what shall I say? — is he to go?”

She was looking with a melancholy gaze in his eyes as he spoke.

“Oh! no, I ought, I am sure I ought, and yet I can’t — no, no, no, I can’t say that!” she said.

“God for ever bless you, darling, for that hope.”

“I think, Mr. Dacre,” she said in a kind of wild dejection, “you know what kind of person I am, and all my faults; and this too I must tell you — I’m ambitious, not in the way the world esteems ambition, but if I were ever to like anyone, it must be one whom in secret my heart could be proud of. I thought I should never meet one, and I know not how it may be, and no one knows

the height and depth of their own madness; but I think if I told you now never to come again, and sent you from me untried, I should have parted with my one wild hope. So you'll come again, and again, and again, till I know you better; and oh! what have I said!"

And she was silent. He too, was silent, radiant with happiness and pride. His heart fluttered up in the rekindled flame of hope, and his brain — the *camera obscura* within that handsome head — was already alight and astir with the scenery and figures of a hundred Quixotic plans and visions.

"And now my life is devoted, Challys, you'll see what I'll become."

Another little pause followed. Her hand was in her own possession now, her face was no longer pale and wild — the beautiful blush had returned.

"And now," said odd Challys Gray, with a sudden awaking to her old, grave, imperious manner, "you are to do exactly what I tell you; you resume exactly your old ways — and — no romance — *remember* — and — so go to the piano and sing me a song, for Julia Wardell is nodding, and we must awake her."

With a flush on his cheek also, and eyes unusually brilliant, he crossed the floor and obeyed.

It was but a verse or two of a little French song, and when it ended, good Mrs.

Wardell, who did not care that her nap should be suspected, said vivaciously —

"A thousand thanks! I think, Laura, he never sang so well as this evening; and he has kept it up so. I am sure we are extremely obliged. Ain't we, Laura?"

"It is very pretty. I like those gay little French things, with just a suspicion of sadness," said she.

"Something theatric, too — a pretty affectation," said Dacre. "The volatility and light enthusiasm of the people is in their music. Is there, I wonder, anywhere, a collection of the music of the Revolution? We know only two or three things — the *Marseillaise* and *Caira*, and no doubt there was character in them all — a romantic vein of ruffianism."

"That, I think, and refinement, are oftener found associated in France than anywhere else," said Laura Gray, talking, though with an effort, as usual.

"The French revolution was a very awful time. I've heard my dear mother talk about it as a thing she could remember," said Mrs.

Wardell. "The time when the poor King and Queen were so near getting over the frontier. It was so interesting, poor things, and so horribly provoking. What's that noise out there?"

"It must be my brougham," said Dacre, walking to the open window. "Yes, indeed, driving up to the door, as a hint to me that I am boring the horses to death by singing so much here."

At the same time the silvery ring of the little clock over the chimney told twelve.

"Twelve o'clock!" exclaimed Julia Wardell, who had counted carefully. I hadn't an idea. It is very rude of me; but you're so friendly, Mr. Dacre, you don't mind — and, Laura, my dear, you know you are never so late as this. How time glides away, especially when one listens to such music as Mr. Dacre makes."

"Yes," said Dacre, with a sigh, "I have quite exceeded my privilege."

He looked hesitatingly at Miss Gray; but she made no sign, and he dare not propose to outstay Mrs. Wardell's outspoken advice.

So "goodnights" were exchanged, and Dacre, with a wild elation at his heart, drove in a dream into town.

## CHAPTER VIII.

### VISITORS IN DE BEAUMIRAIL'S SITTING-BOOM.

IN the Fleet Prison, now happily no more, Mr de Beaumirail had two apartments, — as good, I dare say, as were to be had in that melancholy barrack of the broken-down soldiers of fortune. There was that gentleman's sitting-room, where he entertained his visitors — few and far between; and beyond it, his bedroom; melancholy apartments, where the day limped tediously away as Richard's night; and their solitary tenant, in his long silk dressing-gown, fluttered slowly back and forward, or moped sourly with his hands in his pockets at the windows.

Outside his own windows stood — two on each stone — four sooty scarlet geraniums, an anonymous souvenir of a damsel in temporary distress, who had occupied a room on the other side, and who had fallen silently in love with him, while he, such is destiny, did not know her from Adam.

The windows were stained and mottled, as if, in that dingy climate, it rained always thin mud in summer, and snowed nothing but dust and soot-flakes in Christmas weather.

A neighbour — a Crown debtor, I believe, who was to emerge no more, and liked the songs of birds — had a blind canary which seemed to be always moulting, but sang very cheerfully, notwithstanding, from its cage, which hung outside the window, and gave De Beaumirail a share of its monotonous minstrelsy.

Good old Mr. Parker dropped in at about eleven o'clock in the morning, and found three gentlemen in Mr de Beaumirail's sitting-room. He knew the suave Mr. Larkin. Mr. Levi, of the fierce black eyes, and sullen mouth, was also there; and the square white head and hard features of Mr. Gillespie also.

Mr. Larkin was delivering his ideas in his own engaging manner over a great old book like a ledger. There were sheets of papers there also tied up in pink tape and labelled, and a japanned tin box stood open on a chair close by, with a padlock dangling from it precariously.

Whatever they were talking about, they stopped abruptly on the entrance of the old man. The little Jew glared savagely at him, as if he was on the point of pulling him out by the ear; and Mr. Gillespie inquired surlily— "What's your will, sir?"

But Mr. Larkin recognised him, and greeting him with his large red hand, and his gracious smile, inquired sweetly whether he, Mr. Larkin, could do anything for Mr. Parker; observing with a slight elevation of his eyes, and a shake of his tall bald head, and a faint plaintive smile, that showed the sinister gaps which time had made at either side in his teeth —

"You find us, Mr. Parker, engaged, sir, in labours very unlike those happier ones in which it is your privilege, if I may so say, to soar — the temporal concerns, sir, the unhappy complications which attend the affairs of a young man who lives as too many young men, it is to be feared, do live. A sad spectacle, sir, this we have before us; a melancholy history of a splendid inheritance, sold, as one may say, for a mess of pottage. Ah, sir, is not it melancholy — isn't it shocking, my dear Mr. Parker?"

Up went the big hands and the pink eyes as he spoke this sentence, and the tall bald head shook in solemn unison with the sentiment.

"But haven't you bought up his debts?" asked the old man, with a look of such simple and kindly inquiry, that Mr. Levi, who was glowering in his face, could not resist a sudden laugh— "boo-hoo, ha-ha!" — still looking straight in the face of the old gentleman, who returned his laugh with an offended look.

Mr. Larkin, had the grace of blushing, but it was an odd kind of blush, and tinged chiefly the narrow dome of his bald head.

"Perhaps that phrase does not quite accurately describe the risk which some friends of Mr de Beaumirail have incurred very distinctly for his own advantage, Mr. Parker, which circumstance, perhaps, you would be so good as to mention to your informant, in the event of his again talking inaccurately with respect to the business of a gentleman whom — though in his sad circumstances he has long ceased to maintain professional relations anywhere — I am still happy, from motives which *you* will, perhaps, appreciate, to advise; and I hope I do so as zealously, whenever as a friend he happens to call upon me, as if his position were, in a worldly point of view, very different indeed."

"I know you very well, Mr. Larkin, better by reputation even than personally. I wish there were many such persons," said good Mr. Parker, in simple sincerity.

"Unprofitable servants, Mr. Parker," said the attorney, softly, dropping his red eyelids for a moment, and with his large hand waving away what his modesty received as a compliment— "we do but our duty, when all's done; what more can we boast? *but* our duty, sir."

"And so lay up treasure, Mr. Larkin, where treasure is abiding," added good Mr. Parker, with eyes that smiled on the angelic man.

"And something nisse in conshols," drawled Mr. Levi, with a leer at the good attorney.

"But this is a little out of our way at present, Mr. Parker," said Larkin, hastily; "I am trying to look through these miserable intricacies — a tangled skein — how different a task from a few minutes' refreshing talk on happier themes with a gentleman and a Mentor — such as Mr. Parker; but business, upon this earth, sir, is, in fact, business; and can I do anything for you, Mr. Parker?"

"No, sir, I thank you; only I hoped to see Mr de Beaumirail; he is not ill, I hope?"

"Oh dear, no; you'll find him in the next room; and I will say, my dear sir," he concluded, in an under tone, laying his big hand carelessly on the clergyman's arm, "I am truly happy that you have looked in, for our poor friend is really in need of a word in season; his temper — his *temper* occasionally is — unpleasant, and he'll be all the better — you understand — a man in spiritual authority; things will be taken from you, you know," and so he bowed him to the threshold of the chamber, opening the door and closing it after him.

"That old muff's always up and down here, blesh him! I don't think I was twishe in this room, but I met him; and you and him gets into such a precious yarn always about your d — d shouls, and such rot!"

"Why the deil didn't you say he was walking down there in the court?" suggested Gillespie also, angrily.

"My *dear* sir! The thing that was not! Besides," he added, recollecting his company, "we'd have had him back in five minutes, Mr. Gillespie."

"Gad I'd a turned the key in the door, and when he'd a cooled his heels a bit on the stairs, he'd a gone home to where he came from, sir," said Gillespie.

Mr. Larkin glanced reflectively, with his under lip, after his habit in such moods, gently held between his finger and thumb, and for a moment, perhaps, the good man thought it might not have been a bad plan.

"But even *you*, Mr. Gillespie, will consider that we should have been sure to meet Mr. Parker again — and no — it would *not* have been right — for it would have excited suspicion — and — and not a word, sir, we say on business here, can possibly be heard in the next room. I've observed that, sir; so, ahem! as I was saying, you *may* lock the door, however — as I was saying, Mr. Gillespie, with respect to that promissory note, Mr. Jellicott's. I'm not, by any means, so sure, sir, that the statute protects him; and if he did pay it, sir, no doubt, Mr. Gillespie, he can show that he did so. Heaven forbid that any opportunity were denied him. I should despise myself if I were capable of anything in such a matter that was not perfectly straight and simple; but people should pay their debts."

"I'm not objecting to make him pay twishe over, no more than you," said Mr. Levi; "but it was by cheque to order, and there's a note acknowledging receipt of cheque. I *know* — for his sholishitor's conducting man, Splinks, and me is as thick as — as you pleashe, and we'll make nothing of it."

And so these worthies debated and disagreed, and agreed again, over the schedule of old debts, which, according to their compact, Mr de Beaumirail had made over to them, and of which they still hoped to make something.

## CHAPTER IX.

### DE BEAUMIRAIL VIEWS HIS SITUATION.

WHEN the old clergyman entered, De Beaumirail was sitting with his feet on the fender of a fire that had expired in ashes. The room was dim with cigar-smoke, and its dismal tenant, in his well-known dressing-gown, was puffing at his weed.

"I'm glad you've come, Mr. Parker, I'm miserable," said De Beaumirail, rising, as he threw his cigar into the ashes, and extending his hand to his visitor.

"I hope, my young friend, you are not suffering?" said Mr. Parker, looking with a kindly concern in his face, as he shook him by the hand.

"Miserably, sir," answered the prisoner.

"Ill?" said the clergyman.

"Ill? — yes; the time is out of joint. I'm ill every way — all the nobler organs — heart, head, and — pocket. Who was ever well in despair? Ay, sir, I'm in hell. I hope, by-the-bye, you don't find the smoke unpleasant. I am in hell, Mr. Parker. You saw my Cerberus sitting outside — the beast that guards my door, with three monstrous *heads* — the white head, the bald head, and the black head — the Scot, the lawyer, and the Jew. I'm sold to that triple-headed monster. They have bought up my debts, sir. I'm a slave — Dickon is bought, and is sold."

"I have just heard, sir, that they have taken that step chiefly for your advantage."

"That is charming. Who said so?"

"Mr. Larkin, sir," said the clergyman.

"Mr. Larkin be d — d," said De Beaumirail. "I beg your pardon, Mr. Parker, I know I ought to have spoken in a more — roundabout way. Pray what do you think of Mr. Larkin?"

"Mr. Larkin appears to me to be a truly exemplary and Christian man."

"So he appears to me; but he isn't. Mr.

Larkin is of this little epitome of hell in which I am a prisoner — the Satan-in-chief."

"Oh, Mr de Beaumirail, my dear sir, *don't* you see how very shocking that way of speaking is? I do assure you, Mr. Larkin is one of the most entirely Christian men I ever met, that is, so far as I am yet acquainted with him; and I have had the pleasure of conversing with him a great deal more than "with others whom I have known four or five times as long; and no man, in my opinion, can fail to make his true character known by his conversation after a time; it is impossible."

"When next he is coming the godly man over you, my dear sir," said De Beaumirail, "I'll give you a recipe to bring him to — himself."

"My dear Mr de Beaumirail, I do assure you, reflections upon Mr. Larkin pain me extremely, you have no conception how much."

"Well, I don't want to pain you, Heaven knows; but I hate that fellow, because he's the most odious of that direful set. I know everything about him; he does not fancy I do; and when next he performs his righteousness before you, just ask him from me whether he has any relations with Mr. Alfred Dacre."

"I should not like, sir, to pain Mr. Larkin, and I don't understand the subject."

"Pray do," said De Beaumirail.

"You can hardly be serious, sir; I could not talk to him *so*. I know him very slightly, and I don't know the meaning of your message."

"It means, sir, that he's capable of the most Satanic conspiracy that ever employed human malice and avarice for its instruments."

"Oh, my dear Mr de Beaumirail!" exclaimed the good clergyman, reprovingly.

"Ay, sir, *my* malice and *other people's* avarice. But I'll not be used further, Mr. Larkin. In the dome of their pandemonium I'll break a hole, and let the light in."

"I don't understand, sir, how you can speak so bitterly," said Mr. Parker.

"Nor I, sometimes," said De Beaumirail, with a short strange laugh. "I sometimes think there is nothing on earth worth being bitter or sweet about."

"I am sure, Mr de Beaumirail, if you knew the interest with which Mr. Larkin invariably speaks of you; he's at this moment working in the next room over your accounts. No paid agent, I am certain, could do it with a more praiseworthy diligence."

"Why, sir, the debts are his own; any rights I had are theirs, and they hold me here under a load of debt as big as Pelion, and I can't see the light nor stir my hand! And here, sir, I was to be their familiar spirit, and aid them in their atrocious enchantments!"

"Now, now, *pray*" remonstrated the clergyman.

"You're a theologian, and have read about Asmodeus. Of course you have all the devils at your fingers' ends, and the devil-on-two-sticks among them. If you were like me, sir, a spirit sealed down in a bottle by three such shabby and villainous conjurors, you'd feel, and perhaps talk even, very like me."

"I came in to pay you a little visit, Mr de Beaumirail—"

"You did very kindly, sir. The sight of a friendly face here is like a window opened in heaven. This place — you don't know what it is, sir — you don't know what it is. Some fellows seem to get accustomed to it, others never. A look forward of a year is like a perspective of seven; and the prospect of a whole life, it is eternity — despair."

"Sir, I still live in hope," began the clergyman.

"Ah, my dear sir," interrupted De Beaumirail, with a chilly laugh, "it is a strange flighty world, full of phantoms, hard to seize upon anything. I don't blame people — I don't blame myself — we are no better and no worse than others; but the whole thing is insane and miserable, and I believe if you could collect into one great funnel the groan and pant of all its sufferings, it would drown the music of the spheres."

"Man is born—" began Mr. Parker.

"I know, to trouble, as the sparks fly upward. Forgive me, sir, but I'm growing, I believe, unfit for human companionship, and more morose than a wounded bear."

"I'm always glad, sir, to hear a friend take a text of Scripture out of my mouth and finish it. I should be a very odd fellow to have charge of a parish — in an age when so few look into their Bibles — if I were offended by anyone's giving me proof that he knew the Scriptures."

"Have you been looking after my interests still? — you are always so good. Have you seen the people at Guildford House?"

"I didn't tell you, did I, about my last visit? I went to tea there a night or two ago," asked old Mr. Parker.

"No — nothing — how was it?"

"Nothing, but merely that I did no good, sir. No, no; it was, in fact, imposed upon me that I should not open the subject."

"And my friend Dacre goes there, doesn't he? He has not softened Miss Gray in my behalf, I dare say?"

"I fear not, Mr de Beaumirail; no, I think not."

"You don't suppose I expected any such thing?" said the captive.

"I don't know, sir; but Mr. Dacre, I believe, is intimate there. I wish very much he were more your friend than you suppose him."

"You think he has an influence, then?" said De Beaumirail.

"I — I rather *do*," answered the clergyman, simply.

"And why?"

"The elder lady, a Mrs. Wardell, who, I assume, from her age and superior experience, is naturally looked up to by Miss Gray, talked a great deal of him. He had been there to tea that night, and she spoke very favourably of him indeed, and as if he was there very often, and on a sudden she seemed to recollect herself as if she ought not to have mentioned him. I think I saw the young lady look at her; perhaps she said something; I don't know."

"Well, the upshot is that only the old lady mentioned him?"

"Yes, only Mrs. Wardell."

"Well, you know she could do nothing."

"Except by her authority with Miss Gray," suggested Mr. Parker.

"I don't believe, sir, that young ladies now-a-days are troubled with much awe of their elders. Besides, I explained before, Miss Gray has no longer the power to release me. So now, sir, I'll try another way — I'll turn the wheel — try a new course, and strike a smashing blow at the villains who are dissecting me in the next room." De Beaumirail, with his clenched hands in his dressing-gown pockets, shook his head as he thus spoke, and smiled with so resolute a frown, that good Mr. Parker was almost frightened.

"My good friend," said he, "I have often told you that patience is a prayer in itself, and implored of you also, if you cannot control either such feelings or the expression of them, at least, in kindness, to spare me the pain of witnessing such ungoverned bursts of feeling."

De Beaumirail made no answer, but looked for a time gloomily out of the window.

"Suppose you come and have a cup of tea with me tomorrow evening? I have a book to give you," said he.

"I'm afraid I can't, my dear friend," said Mr. Parker.

"But why not?" pleaded De Beaumirail.

"It is my night for preparing my sermon. I can't leave it to Saturday, which is one of my fatiguing days, and the evening finds me tired and very little good for."

"Ah! your sermon? I daren't interfere with that, sir. For where a sermon's in the case, all other things, of course, give place," said De Beaumirail, slightly modifying the quotation. "But if not tomorrow, come tonight."

"I promised to dine at Guildford House," said Mr. Parker.

"Oh — that's very well — at Guildford House. Well, then you may meet Mr. Dacre there?"

"He was not mentioned — no one, in fact. I think it was to be quite to ourselves. But why should you suppose Mr. *Dacre*?"

"Because one of my people tells me he is perpetually in and out there," said De Beaumirail. "I hope you may light upon him."

"I don't see, sir, exactly why. I don't know him. I knew but one of that family."

"If he is one of the Dacres of Chezledon —"

"Yes, so he is."

"Well, I knew but one of that family, and he's dead — poor young man. I saw him often in his last illness, and attended his funeral."

"He was the son of Harry Dacre of Chezledon, wasn't he? His name was Alfred Dacre?"

"So it was, sir," acquiesced Mr. Parker. "And he is the person who visits at Guildford House," said De Beaumirail.

The clergyman smiled and shook his head. "Ah, sir, impossible, for the reason I told you. Poor Mr. Alfred Dacre, I should be happy that he were still among us."

"Well, sir," continued De Beaumirail, without in the least minding Mr. Parker's little difficulty, "I am very anxious you should see him there. I should so like to know on what terms he is received, for I think I might possibly make him useful to me still. When were you last at Guildford House?"

"I drank tea, I mentioned, a few days ago."

"And going to dine to-day? They have taken quite a fancy to you. You'll soon have an influence as powerful as Dacre's in that house. I've an idea of a way in which some good may yet be done for me, if you two were only to put your heads together over my lamentable case."

The clergyman smiled faintly, and nodded; and De Beaumirail understood that there was passing in his mind the thought how obstinately that crazy prisoner will adhere to his fixed idea, and insist that Alfred Dacre is still living.

"Sooner or later, you know, you must meet, and then you'll mention me, and find out how he's disposed," said De Beaumirail.

"Sooner or later, perhaps, but not in this world, sir," replied the clergyman.

"We shall see, sir. Well, then, you are going?"

"Yes, a very hurried visit."

"I wish you believed in holy water, and that I had some to offer you; you need some prophylactic against the powers of evil as you pass through that room; will you excuse my going with you to the door? I shiver at sight of those villains, and can hardly answer for myself."

"Farewell, sir, good-by."

And the old clergyman took his leave, again entering the anteroom, and disturbing the little parliament of pandemonium, — two of whose members, at least, looked sourly enough at the gentle intruder, who quickly made his exit.

## CHAPTER X.

### TWO OLD FRIENDS MEET.

THIS evening, at Guildford House, Alfred Dacre turned up as usual.

When he entered the drawingroom, Julia Wardell had not yet appeared, and Laura was seated in her usual place near the window.

Old Mr. Parker was sipping his coffee in the library in the agreeable company of Mrs. Wardell.

"I thought you'd come upstairs," said Miss Gray. "So I left my cousin Julia for a few minutes to take care of our good old friend, Mr. Parker. I wrote to tell you — I suppose you got my note — that he was coming."

"Oh, yes, thank you very much."

"And that we should give him his tea in the library, as you did not care to meet him," she continued.

"I am so sorry you should have put yourself at all out of your way, but it *is* better I should not meet him just now."

The fact is, Miss Gray's warning had not reached him; and if it had, I don't think he would have gone to Guildford House that evening.

"And he was talking of going away when I came here, a few minutes ago, so I'm sure he's not going to stay very much longer," said she.

There was somehow a little consciousness, and a constraint also, in their meeting. They were talking as yet very much as they used to do, before the scene of last night; he could not discover in her reception of him any marked change. He fancied that if there was any alteration, it was that there had occurred just that slight but appreciable change of temperature which is perceived within the half-hour after sunset on an autumn evening — a faint chill.

A little graver — her wise little head perhaps a little more cogitative than usual — still there was nothing to alarm him, for there was the soft blush, and in her eyes was that liquid fire which poets describe.

He sat beside her, and he said in a very low tone, "You are not vexed, I hope, at my having come?"

"No, indeed — no, Mr. Dacre — I should have been very much vexed if you had not come. I should have thought it quite unaccountable, and very unkind."

"I was so afraid, I thought I had done something to give you pain."

"No; I should have told you so."

"Then, you regret — oh *do* you regret having allowed me to speak even the few words I said yesterday?"

"I have been, since then, more unhappy. I am in a labyrinth; I have lost my way, and I have been silent. I have been troubling myself with the thought that you might have fancied I had said that which I never meant to say, for I do not know whether I shall ever like anyone on earth more than as a very good friend. I hope you are not vexed with me, Mr. Dacre; but I could not bear to appear to mislead you, or to have said more than I meant."

"No one, Miss Gray, could ever misunderstand you. But, oh! do not mistake me, and add to your warning, words that mean despair."

"I have said nothing — I want you to understand that I have said nothing; and you will stay here until Julia and I can come up; you are not to go away, you know — I came up to prevent that. I'll think you are vexed with us if you do. Poor old Mr. Parker — he's so good. He has been so kind and patient with me; and I know he can't understand me — I hardly do myself — about that miserable affair, that we must be kind to him — that is all, not very much — that is in my power; I like him so much; I like him so *very* much. He says he is writing some work, and he was looking at the French folio engravings of eastern cities, and scenery with so much interest, that I told him to come as often as he likes, and I intend to make him go to Gray Forest next month, when his little holidays begin. But till then don't be uncomfortable, or fancy that you are likely to meet him here, for he shall have the library to himself; and you know you can't meet; and he goes home so early — in fact just about the time you usually come. I half blame myself, I was so afraid, after I had done it, that you might think there was danger of his meeting you here."

So spoke Miss Gray, and paused, looking at him.

"I have to make a call, very near this, merely a word or two, and I shall be back again. I looked in to say so, and it turns out luckily, for old Mr. Parker will have gone away by that time. In a day or two it won't matter whether I meet him or not, but just at this moment it would not do; so, for half an hour, I say goodbye."

As Dacre walked down the steps he said to himself, with a dissatisfied laugh —

"How oddly things turn out — this good old simpleton is about to become a fixture here, and I must sooner or later meet him face to face. I hope he won't lose his wits. He'll precipitate things a little, I dare say, and whether for good or evil I can't conjecture. What a world! To think of *me*, of all men, gliding off my path into this desperate romance!"

He glanced toward the library window and sighed.

"If something like this had come earlier; but what vainer than regrets? Might there have been a happy life? — but as it is I scarcely dare look at it, for what good remains except the melancholy glory of a self-sacrifice?"

In this there was, of course, something of that self-conceit in which, like other young men, he was principled. But in his heart the ruling idolatry is declining — "the great god Pan is dead" — and a truer and holier worship is superseding that selfish superstition which had burnt a perpetual incense, and offered up so many sacrifices before his own handsome image.

Along with the opening of a nobler nature, there opens a deeper melancholy — a loftier heaven, a profounder hell. This young man, yet old in the world's ways, bright, cold, and trenchant, as a beautiful steel weapon, was at first shocked and then perplexed by the discovery that he had a heart — that in a barren field he had found a treasure, for which no imaginable price was



too great. Dacre's carriage stood scarcely thirty yards down the short avenue; as he loitered on the steps in his dream, he fancied that he heard the library door open, and with a sudden recollection he ran down the steps, got into his carriage, and drove away.

In the meantime, in the library Mr. Parker had reestablished himself in his chair, and was entertaining the ladies with a plan he had conceived of exploring the upper extremity of the Red Sea by means of diving-bells, and a competent troop of navvies, for the purpose of bringing to light such relics of Pharaoh's host, as he was prepared to show, chemically and geologically, must still lie, very nearly uninjured, under the deposit.

Half an hour, nearly, had passed pretty much in this kind of discourse, when the servant, to Miss Gray's secret relief, came in to inform Mr. Parker that a man living in his parish had called to beg he would return to visit a dying person, and saying that he had got a cab outside the gate, and would wait there for Mr. Parker.

"Hadn't he better tell him to bring his cab to the door?" said Miss Gray.

But Mr. Parker said no. He preferred walking down, and would bid his friends good night now — and so at last was quite gone.

On the steps where Dacre but a short time before had stood in his soliloquy, the old clergyman also paused, and from that platform for a moment looked up in silent adoration upon the myriad shining stars that gleamed through the dark blue space above him, the manifestation of the Creator's glory and power illimitable; and in the sublime and tender rapture of that expansion the good old man walked down the short but shadowy avenue, and having emerged from the gate, he looked to the right and to the left — but saw only one figure — that of a gentleman with a short cloak on, who was walking toward him, but with the air of a man bent on a more distant route, walking at a firmer and more rapid pace than a mere loungeur waiting for an arrival. He approached and passed him by without a symptom of observation or recognition. So there was no one awaiting him, and no sign of a cab. Mr. Parker walked slowly down toward the main Brompton road, looking out as keenly as he could for the person who had summoned him to return to his duties.

He had not walked forty steps when he was overtaken, and a hand from behind was gently laid upon his shoulder.

"Running away from me, Mr. Parker?" said the voice in an undertone.

Mr. Parker halted and was silent, peering with wrinkled brows earnestly in his face, but that face was somewhat muffled as well as shaded by his broadleafed hat, and the night was dark.

"You — did *you* call for me?" inquired the clergyman.

"Yes, this moment, a sick call — a sick parishioner; let's come on to that lamp at the corner, where we can see one another."

The clergyman paused, still looking at him, and he said, hesitating —

"It is *very* odd — but certainly, sir — let us go."

And as they walked, he involuntarily peeped more than once at his companion.

## CHAPTER XI.

### COLLOQUY.

"I beg your pardon," said Mr. Parker, whose curiosity was excited; "but may I ask, am I acquainted with you, or have I ever been?"

"Yes, sir, you once were, and I hope to restore myself to your recollection when we reach that lamp; but I have one stipulation to make."

"Very good, sir," said the clergyman.

"And that is, that you don't utter my name," said the person who walked by his side.

"Not to mention your name?" repeated Mr. Parker.

The stranger stopped short.

"No, not to *utter* it, now or after. If you promise this as a Christian man, I'll go on; but if you hesitate, I turn about and you see me no more."

"Sir, I do make you the promise; I think you have a perfect right to exact it; and pray what *is* your name?"

"I don't mean to mention it."

"Are you, sir — are you a Mr. Dacre?" asked Mr. Parker, again hesitating, and speaking in a very low tone, but with a species of excitement.

"I'll first try whether you recognise me, please; I don't want to say my name, if it is to be avoided, for stone walls have ears; and observe, I hold you strictly to your promise."

"Of course. I only meant to ask, are you related to Mr. Alfred Dacre, son of Mr. Dacre, of Chezledon?"

"We shall have light enough, in one minute more, to answer your question without speaking, if you will only have the goodness to walk on."

"If you were to raise your voice ever so little I think I should guess," said Mr. Parker, still hesitating. "It isn't curiosity, sir, it is that there were some unpleasant things; and, in fact, I should prefer, if any meeting is to take place between any member of that family and me, that it should not occur in this way. It should be, sir, for very many reasons, a little more formally."

"At the lamp at that angle, sir, we can see in both directions and all around. I have only a few words to say, but I should like to see that no one else is near; and as to meeting more formally, as you say, I don't think I shall mind it."

"I said, sir, what was in my mind. I think, if there is anything to talk over, it had better be in my house, or anywhere else, where a quiet interview may take place. But I am speaking hypothetically, and in any case, rather than part with you as you alternatively propose, you can of course talk to me here, or where you please."

He had by this time come close to the lamp which he had already indicated as their halting place. It stood where the dead wall, overtopped by trees, under the foliage of which they had been walking, made a slight bend, affording a clear view up and down the narrow road, and shedding light enough to prevent a surprise by either approach.

"Don't mind naming me, Mr. Parker; but it does seem odd you don't know me. Now, sir, look — here I am."

He let his cloak fall backward a little upon his shoulders, and raised his hat. It was Alfred Dacre who stood before him, smiling. He even laughed gently, as Mr. Parker stepped a little tremulously back with a stare and gape of dumb astonishment.

He drew nearer to the amazed old gentleman, and laying his hand softly to his breast, he said, still smiling, but in a very low tone —

"Don't say my name — pray don't — remember you promised; and now I'll tell you something of my plans, if you allow me."

"My gracious! — Good heavens! — I can scarcely believe my eyes — I am bewildered, sir," said the old man.

"We need not stand here, you know," said Dacre. "It was only for the discovery, and let us walk on. I've learned this, that people are sometimes watched when they don't suspect it."

"Then it was you, sir," began Mr. Parker deliberately, "was it, who sent in —"

"Just now, to tell you that a sick parishioner wanted you. Yes; and sick enough, just now, in head and heart I am, Mr. Parker, and actually lodging in your parish. Could I have more exactly said the truth?" said Dacre.

"Well, sir, I certainly never in all my life was half so much amazed," repeated Mr. Parker, taking breath.

"Don't — don't, pray, allude to *anything*," said Dacre, glancing quickly over his shoulder. "I may be led into trouble if you talk. Let us turn back and walk a little the other way. Thanks."

"I'm afraid, sir, I ought to be on my way home. Could not I see you early tomorrow?" asked the old clergyman.

"You ought? Why you *are* on your way home. You'll lose twenty minutes, perhaps, waiting for a 'bus, and not be set down after all near your own house. Now, I'm going to set you down at your own door in my brougham, and all that will save twice as much time as I shall detain you."

"Well, sir, yes — if it doesn't put you out of your way. I shall be very much obliged."

Dacre smiled as he told him how happy he should be, for in the old man's face was still the wild and amazed look of a man just startled by an alarm from his sleep.

"You were at Guildford House, Mr. Parker? I had an antipathy to some people there — not unnatural — but I've changed my mind. Miss Gray, in whom you take an interest, I have saved from the greatest danger she ever was, or ever will be, in. No matter what or how. I'll explain another time — perhaps. A circle of fraud has been drawn round that young lady; but I am master of the charm — it shan't prevail; it can't unless I choose. But I go my own way about it, and you must keep faith with me; nothing must be known of me at Guildford House, except what they already know. There I am Mr. Alfred Dacre, and as to all the rest they are, and must remain, in utter darkness till I enlighten them. Do you return there tonight? No, I forgot."

"No, sir, no. I've rather outstaid my time," said he.

"Yes, it can't happen tonight; but it may in a day or two. Remember, I've a hard card to play. I have three of the most suspicious villains in London watching me; and when you meet me at Guildford House, if it should happen, remember I am its guardian angel, and you betray me to my worst enemies if you divulge one syllable of my story."

"But, sir, I can't be accessory to anything at all of the nature of a deception," said Mr. Parker, a little shocked.

"I ask only silence," said his companion. "That is always understood where one honourable man places another in possession of his secret. I don't think that either honour or religion imposes upon the confidant the perfidy of divulging it."

"Sir, I only say — *peremptorily* — that anything indirect, though never so little, I will have neither act nor part in," said Mr. Parker, resolutely.

"Well, then, this you may promise — they know perfectly that you know me, for I told them so; they are aware that Ardenbroke — Lord Ardenbroke, you know — knows me also. He gave me a promise not to mention anything more than I had told them myself, -and he has kept his word. I don't think it too much to expect from you, who are not, as he is, a relation, to observe the same reticence about that which in no respect concerns you?" said Mr. Dacre, petulantly.

"I shall volunteer no information, sir," said Mr. Parker. "But I think I ought not to have been placed in this situation."

"And if questions should be put to you, you will say, as Ardenbroke did, that you are under promise to mention *nothing* about me — that's fair," insisted Mr. Dacre.

"Yes, sir — *that* I may say, and I will," said the clergyman.

"Very well, sir. And now, Mr. Parker, one other kindness. I shall go back to Guildford House tonight, as I find you are positively not returning; but I should not care to meet you there, and simply for this reason, that I should not like to trust too much to anyone's presence of mind; people, you know, can't be always thinking of one thing, and always on their guard; and it would be very unpleasant to me, and I fancy not very pleasant to you. So, as I never go there till about this hour, could you manage to make your visits earlier; and if they want you to dine or drink tea there, you can say, 'I have no objection in the world,' but that there would be an awkwardness in your meeting me — only don't, of course, put it in a way that would make them fancy me a person whom you would not associate with; it is very easy to say that there is a circumstance — reflecting no discredit — which yet would make our meeting embarrassing," said Dacre. "Can't you say that?"

"Yes, I may; I'm sure I can say that," answered Mr. Parker.

"And I'm going to tell you more: I have no one to speak to but you, and I must tell it. Let us turn again here, and walk towards my trap — I mean, my brougham. I promise it shan't keep you longer than five minutes; and I should die if I had no one to talk to."

"Five minutes, sir; but it really mustn't exceed that," said Mr. Parker.

So, walking side by side, his companion in a low tone addressed him.

## CHAPTER XII.

### AGAIN AT GUILDFORD HOUSE.

"WHEN I contemplate my position," said Mr. Dacre, "I am as much amazed as you are. I have got myself into a strange situation — another time I'll tell you how. It is too long a story for our five minutes' walk. For the present I shall content myself with asking a favour."

"Say what it is you wish, sir," replied the clergyman.

"Your voice is that of a man who is willing to help his friend," said Alfred Dacre, turning toward him with a dark and sudden smile.

"I make no promises, sir, until I shall have heard the nature of the assistance you require," said he.

"Well, that's reasonable; only speak a little lower," said Mr. Dacre, looking around him with a sharp glance. "You have a brother holding high rank in the Austrian army; you must write to him about me."

"So I shall, with pleasure, sir; provided you can show me how my doing so can be of any use to you," said Mr. Parker.

"That is something off my mind, sir," said he. "I'll show you how tomorrow."

"Then you may reckon upon me, sir."

"And — and one thing more; but don't exclaim when I tell it to you."

"How do you mean, sir?"

"I mean whatever you decide," said Alfred Dacre, almost in a whisper, having first glanced furtively about him again. "Pray don't raise your voice or express the least surprise. I tell you I don't know who may be near."

"Very well, sir."

"I want you to do me a great kindness."

"What is it, sir?"

"And you must not mention it anywhere. It is a secret, mind."

"Well, sir, whether I do your commission or not, I'll not betray your secret," said Mr. Parker.

"Let us turn the other way, for a moment," said Alfred Dacre. "Listen — I've made up my mind to go abroad immediately. Now don't — *don't*, pray, say a word; and you must get my passport. Pray, oblige me. I'll see you in the morning, and tell you fifty things that will surprise you; and you won't refuse me. Now, I know you are surprised; so you need not tell me. But only say you will do me this last and vital kindness?"

"Sir, I really —" began the clergyman.

"Must think about it, and I know that will end in your doing it," interrupted Dacre. "You have always been so kind."

He pressed his arm with his hand as he said this, and looked very earnestly in his face, like a man who has a great stake trembling upon another's decision.

"Yes, you know sufficiently well," said Mr. Parker, "that you may always reckon upon me, within the limit of duty, to the full extent of my opportunities. But I should prefer, as you say, thinking it over; in fact, I could not consent to take any step in the matter without knowing more about it, and being quite clear that I should be doing right; and — I'll sleep upon it, if you please," and with a sigh he looked in his face for a moment, and looking up again he said —

"It seems to me so incredible — a dream — quite a dream!"

"My whole life seems to me one long dream. No wonder one of its oddest passages should seem so to you. There is my brougham, however — one of its few realities, you'll find it, if you trust it to leave you at home. So, goodnight, and you'll see me in the morning, and then I'll unroll a bit of the future, as odd — as odd as the strange cartoon of the past, in which, in every change of scenery, amid a throng of admirers or oppressors, crowned or bleeding, the athlete contends with fortune."

"I hope, sir, it may all end well. Heaven grant it!" said Mr. Parker, as he stepped into the carriage, the door of which Dacre had opened.

"Better end any way than go on *wrong*," said Dacre as he shut the door; "and when the hour comes, and it is time to part, I'll take off my hat, and say goodnight."

And as he spoke he smiled and raised his hat, and the servant, previously instructed, drove rapidly away to leave Mr. Parker at home.

Away went the carriage, leaving Dacre alone at the broad confluence of the lane down which they had walked, and the great Brompton highway. It was very quiet that night; scarcely a footstep heard up or down the dry pathway; the rumble of a distant 'bus, the bark of a few lonely dogs, and the whistling of a fellow who stood outside the Bull and Horns, were the only sounds then audible. Mr. Dacre looked up and down the pathway shrewdly, then climbed the low wall that fenced the lane. There was no sign of a listener near. In high spirits he jumped down again to the road, and smiling in the dark as he passed under the trees, which in that place overarched the lane, he walked swiftly back again to Guildford House.

He saw the lights in the drawingroom as he approached, and he ran up the stairs wild with the spirits of excitement.

"I've returned, Miss Gray, and have transacted my little business, and feel happier than ever schoolboy did when dismissed for the holidays," he said.

"That's very good of you," said Mrs. Wardell, taking some of this speech to herself, with a gracious smile; "and we are very glad to see you, also. We are, indeed, always, Mr. Dacre."

"How can I thank you?" said he, gaily, and with a glance toward Miss Gray. "It is delightful to find a welcome, especially so far from home, and where one's merits are so few and small, and the privilege — so immense."

"And I hope, from what you say, your teasing business is now quite over," said Mrs. Wardell, "and that your time will be more at your disposal."

"Yes; my business is nearly ended!" said he. "I hope tomorrow will conclude it, and emancipate a slave."

As he thus spoke, Miss Laura Gray fancied there was in his face an exultation beyond the gay sense of relief which he implied.

"Are you going to sing for us? do, pray," said Mrs. Wardell.

"No, pray, no; you wont ask me tonight."

"And why not, Mr. Dacre?" asked Mrs. Wardell.

"Because I'm too happy," he answered.

"Now that is no reason," said Julia Wardell. "Laura, why don't you join me? You know, Mr. Dacre, that is no reason; tell him so, Laura."

"But I think it is a reason," said Laura.

"A thousand thanks, Miss Gray," said he; "I feared no one could understand it but myself, and yet it is true."

"Well, that is highly metaphysical, I suppose," said Mrs. Wardell, "and I don't pretend to understand it. Do we, my darling little old precious Mousey? No, we don't, not a bit of it."

The latter question was to her little dog. "But haven't you come unusually late, Mr. Dacre, this evening?" inquired Mrs. Wardell.

"So I have, but inevitably, need I say? and earlier, too, than usual I must go, but all to regain my liberty the sooner," said Mr. Dacre. "I promised to meet some people tonight upon business. I'm tired of business — I hate it; but when you have counted the last milestone, you almost forgive the journey its tediousness."

"Yes, indeed, country milestones, very true, and a very tiresome occupation it is, we know, Laura, don't we? Nearly seventy miles we drove up here; such a journey from Gray Forest, dust and everything; would you believe it, I actually fell asleep on the way?" said Julia Wardell.

"I've had a more tedious journey still, Mrs. Wardell; not a journey, however, to make one sleep, by any means; and, oh dear! how glad I shall be to set my foot on the ground once more, and, escaping from the dust and rumble, to see the sky and green leaves, far from the deafening highroad of life. There was a time, Miss Gray, when I liked noise and glare, and not very long since. I think I'm changed; I hardly know myself."

"I forgot to tell you," said Mrs. Wardell, "you'll be glad to hear that poor Charles Mannering is ever so much better, and likely very soon to be out and about again."

"Oh! I haven't heard, as you know, for a day or two: my friend has not been looking after him since he began to get all right so rapidly."

"Did I give you his letter, Laura?" inquired Julia Wardell.

"No; you read it aloud when you were in the library."

"So I did. Dear me, I've forgot it there." And Mrs. Wardell waddled off in a fuss, and lighted her candle on the lobby, and went down to the library, for there were things in that letter which she did not care to have seen by curious eyes, and while she was away Alfred Dacre sat down near Laura Gray, and, said, he —

"You have commanded me to be very formal, Miss Gray, and I must obey; but there are times when silence is torture, and I have so many things to say, and time is so short."

"Time so short, Mr. Dacre, do you mean tonight?"

"I mean altogether. I mean that before a week, probably, I shall have to leave England."

"Oh, I did not understand; but only for a short time; it wont be for long, surely?"

"No, no, that is, I hope not; I may remain longer there, however; delays may occur, but — but it seems to me inevitable that I should go for a time, and, if my hours *are* measured, to lose one of them is anguish."

"Now? is this fair? Aren't you talking heroics? and if you do, I can't follow you, and your soliloquy is quite contrary to your promise, and you must not — no, *no*, you *shan't*, and I wont excuse you if you do."

Miss Gray stood up quite in earnest, with eyes that flashed, and a brilliant colour, as she said these words, and Alfred Dacre heard them with a pang and a chill.

Perhaps he ought to have read all this quite differently, and known that this peremptoriness indicated only her distrust of herself.

"Of course, I obey," he said sadly; "and now the hour has arrived which I cannot outstay. I appointed to meet some people whom it is essential to see — whom I must see, in fact, or things will be so complicated that I shall be unable to act; I can't explain it, bit by bit. You must have the entire case before you, and all together; and, as I said, you soon shall — you shall — and in that true story, beautiful Challys Gray, you will understand how I have — adored. you."

She was looking down at her little foot, with the same beautiful flush in her cheeks, very gravely. She did not raise her eyes. He hesitated for a moment, and then with a sigh, and without another word, he left the room.

## CHAPTER XIII.

### IN WHICH MR. DACRE VISITS THREE CONVIVIAL GENTLEMEN.

"SHALL I ever know myself again?" said Dacre, with a kind of shudder, as he drove away. "I can't give her up. I'm enchanted, and yet my plain course is to bid her goodbye, and go to my room, and — cut my throat."

He had fallen into a habit of watching the light in the window as long as it remained in sight. As the carriage turned the corner at the gate, he kissed his hand toward that disappearing light, and a mist was in his eyes, and he whispered, "Darling, darling, good night." And then he threw himself back in the carriage with a great sigh.

"I believe it is impossible to think alone, either that, or I'm going mad. I can arrange nothing, there's not one clear idea in my mind. I believe in such utter solitude of mind, and agitation of heart, connected thought is unattainable. One hour, one thing, the next, another, the eddies and undulations of chaos. Now for my scoundrels. I had no idea what a wretch I was until my impetus failed, and my scheme stood lifeless before me."

He looked out of the carriage window— "Where are we now? Ho! Trafalgar-square. We shall soon see them — instruments, masters, accomplices. What! How slowly this beastly thing gets along."

Nevertheless, it was getting on at a very good pace. But Mr. Dacre was impatient, and his fever heightened as he drew near the trysting-place, and often popped his head out of the window, and throwing himself back, kicked his heel against the opposite cushion in irrepressible restlessness.

At length the carriage stopped at Mr. Gillespie's door, and Dacre jumped out as it opened.

"Mr. Gillespie upstairs?" he asked of the maid.

Yes, he was; and two gentlemen were with him at supper; and he expected a gentleman, Mr. Dacre, to come, and ordered that he should be shown up on his arrival.

As Dacre ran up the stairs, he laughed low to himself, and delivered a double knock on Mr. Gillespie's drawingroom door with the head of his cane.

Alfred Dacre was approaching these gentlemen in an unwonted mood, not quite hilarious, nor yet familiar, for there were latent in it the cynicism and banter of suppressed scorn.

Three persons were in Mr. Gillespie's drawingroom when Mr. Dacre opened the door. They sat in the fragrance of whisky-punch, which he had brewed, after the old fashion, in a bowl, and under a canopy of tobacco-smoke.

Mr. Levi sat near the fire, with his heels on a chair, smoking a great cigar, and blowing his clouds in thin streams toward the ceiling. The Scottish intonation of Mr. Gillespie was heard in loud and genial harshness, as he recited his repertory of lying old stories for the amusement of his guests. Opposite to him sat Mr. Larkin, with a celestial smile, which went far to sanctify that equivocal gathering. He and his host were alike tinted with that agreeable rosininess with which punch suffuses cheeks, chins, noses, and even heads, when they are bald.

"Come in, sir, ye'r welcome, mon, and sit ye down," said the host, who, as getting fou and unco' happy, had expanded as on all occasions of excitement, pleasurable or otherwise, was his wont, into his broad Scotch. "And what the deil's gane wi' that idle limmer, that should 'a brought us up the broiled bones half an hour ago? Pull the bell, Mr. Levi, if it's not inconvenient, and we'll have them up in no time; and sit ye down; nane but friends here, sir, and there's a plate for ye, and a knife and fork, and the hizzie's coming with a bit broil, for it's ill speakin' between a fou man and a fasting; no need of introduction to the company, sir. I think ye'll a spoken wi' my friend Mr. Larkin, and Mr. Levi, over the way, before now," he added, with a sly jocularity.

"Making merry, sir," said Mr. Larkin with a heavenly smile, and his nose and other features in an unusual glow. "In an innocent way, my friend Mr. Gillespie — he'll allow me to call him so — would insist on his hospitable privileges; and we have all heard the Caledonian proverb, it's good, sir, to be merry and wise — merry *and* wise, sir. You see the force, Mr. Mr. —"

"Dacre" said that gentleman. "Yes, Mr. Larkin, merry and wise; or as we south of the Tweed would say, tipsy and sober."

"I trust not the former, sir," said Mr. Larkin, with a momentary grandeur. "I humbly trust not, sir. We are nowhere forbidden —"

"Oh, no," interrupted Dacre, "nowhere but in the streets, and then they fine you five shillings, which leaves an attorney but one and eightpence from his last fee."

"Ah, ha, Mr., Mr. Dacre, you are amusing; I'm always diverted when you please to be so. I can't say, however, that I do much in legal practice. I've been much more connected with land; my friends lie chiefly in that direction. I have the honour to know a good many persons — old friends, attached more or less to my family — persons of distinction, in fact, and I have been drawn very much into the direction of their estates, and — liking me, and knowing all about me, so that —"

"That's all so interesting, Mr. Larkin," said Mr. Dacre, "and — no, thanks, I'll not take any," he said, waving away the glass of punch which Mr. Gillespie had ladled from the bowl, and now presented. "But though I shan't drink any myself, you must all fill bumpers, for I've come to tell you this, we are on the point of — victory!"

"Victory! — Hout, mon, do you mean —" exclaimed Gillespie.

Mr. Larkin, with his small rat-like eyes, looked on him intently, and Mr. Levi lowered his cigar, and with his great mouth agape, glared on him with his lurid black eyes.

"Mean? Of course I mean immediate and certain, gentlemen. Jews, Christians, Scotchmen, fill your glasses, and drink to our success," cried Mr. Dacre, giving the table a blow with his hand, that made plates and glasses jump and jingle, and caused the liquor in the punch-bowl to dance in concentric rings. "And if you don't fill your glasses, this moment, to the brim, I'll smash that bowl with a blow of my stick, and cut the heads off your candles at a stroke. Come, gentlemen, we are all friends, as you say."

"All friends," they acquiesced in various tones of alacrity. "For as the great Roman martyr and moralist, Cataline, said— '*Idem velle atque idem nolle, id demum firma amicitia est*' D — n you, drink your odious mixtures when I command you."

"Here, Larkin, ye deevil's buckie, drink this. I tauld ye amang us, we'd mak a spune, or spoil a horn," cried Gillespie, in high elation, forcing the tumbler of punch which Dacre had declined into Larkin's hand, not minding though the nectar trickled over that good man's knuckles.

"Hollandsh and water for me," said Mr. Levi, preparing accordingly.

"And what for no — Leeberty Hall gentlemen, and here's the hizzie wi' the broiled banes, sir. Set it down here, lassie, and awa' wi' ye. That will do, shut to the door. And noo, sirs, we'll drink to our success, sirs, and three times three."

Laughing gently at the absurdity of the ceremonial, Mr. Larkin, whose heart was beating fast with the ardour of avarice, and finding that he was in for it, joining with a childlike, smiling simplicity that was very delightful to witness.

"Drink it all, sir. I've another toast to give you," cried Mr. Dacre.

So, with three times three, hip-hip, hurrah, and so forth, in their boyish mirth these innocent souls honoured Mr. Dacre's toast, and Mr. Larkin playfully finished his honest bumper.

"And how soon, sir, by what day, Mr., Mr. Dacre, when is the rent-day, sir? Ye ken what I mean; is it fixed yet? 'twill come betimes, I warrant, hey?" said Mr. Gillespie, with a greedy chuckle, rubbing his hands.

"In a week or ten days," said Mr. Dacre.

Mr. Gillespie made a great gasp, and an oath, and his hard-featured countenance puckered up with delight, like the face of a hoary old chimpanzee, while Mr. Levi bounced up with a loud "hooray!" and added with an oath of his own— "Then that stock's looking up; newshe for the governor," and another "hooray."

"And if it were permitted me," said the bland voice of Mr. Larkin, "as in a friendly way, we are this evening indulging in a little goodhumoured badinage (he pronounced the word as it is spelt), I may be permitted to return Mr. — , my esteemed friend's toast, by proposing the health of a person of very first-class merit indeed, whom we all here present desire to see happily united — a lady residing not a hundred miles from Old Brompton, and whom I may name "Name any lady of my acquaintance — *dare* to name her, and by heaven, I'll fling you out of that window."

The accent of frenzy with which Dacre almost shrieked this threat was so sudden, his face was so bloodless, his eyes gleamed such livid hatred, and the clenched hand that was advanced toward the dumb-stricken attorney quivered with such extremity of passion, that the spectacle resembled rather the starting of an apparition from the floor than a transformation wrought by sudden anger.

"Hey — guide us, Mr. Dacre," cried Gillespie, extending his arm and hand with a soothing gesture; "ye wouldn't, sure. Why, — douce Mr. Larkin — ye would na be for gieing douce Jos. Larkin, a craiga-thraw. Hout, mon, he never meant the least offence, sir, tishn't in him. What don't ye speak for yourself, Mr. Larkin? Tell him, Levi, will ye?"

Mr. Levi, so far from taking any trouble to smooth matters, seemed to think it a very pretty quarrel as it stood, and evidently enjoyed it more than a dog or cock fight, and was grinning and glowering at the group with undisguised interest and entertainment, from the mist of his tobacco smoke.

"Allow me one moment," said Mr. Larkin, persuasively. "I'm most unfortunate; and I beg to assure you—"

"That will do — that's enough," interrupted Mr. Dacre; "only don't do it again; you had *better* not."

Mr. Larkin threw himself back, with his arm over the back of his chair and his head thrown back, so that he looked mildly on the ceiling, and closed his eyes; for being a proud man, Mr. Larkin did not choose to admit himself frightened, and chose rather to appear patient and as much amused as a religious attorney ought to be.

"And now we are all comfortable again, Mr. Dacre. Ye'll drink a dram in friendship wi' Mr. Larkin?" suggested Gillespie.

"No," said Dacre, recovering; "no; I'll drink no drams, but I'll give you, gentlemen, another toast. I give you Mr. Larkin. Mr. Larkin in the management of my estates — I don't know a rogue in England I'd prefer. You shall have the management of them, Mr. Larkin; and you shall drink your own health, sir, or it's all off. Gillespie, put a glass of brandy in his tumbler, and fill it up with punch."

"But, sir," remonstrated Mr. Larkin, "I should be ill."

"Drunk, sir — drunk, you mean — and who the devil cares whether you are drunk or sober?"

"I don't say drunk, Mr. Dacre — there — there — pray don't, pray don't, Mr. Dacre — but if I were knocked up tomorrow. I have business, sir, as well as a position, I hope," he said grandly.

"All I say is this," interrupted Dacre, "if you don't drink my toast — a bumper, sir — you don't manage my estate; one guinea richer for me you never shall be, if I can prevent it."

"Hout, Mr. Larkin, what for do you fash yourself, and make such a fuss about your drap punch, and anger our gude friend, Mr. Dacre, for naething?" exclaimed Mr.

Gillespie, thrusting the tumbler into Mr. Larkin's very reluctant hand.

Mr. Levi, who, I'm afraid, was a little malicious, enjoyed his friend Mr. Larkin's perplexity.

"Well, sir, if I do this, I really must not be expected—"

"You'll not be expected to walk. Oh, no, we'll drive you home in a hansham," interposed Mr. Levi.

"I say, I mean, it must end here — it really must," expostulated Mr. Larkin, with as much dignity as he could rally.

So that toast, also, was drunk with all the honours.

"And ye say in a week, maybe, or ten days at maist?" said Mr. Gillespie, grinning, while his harsh red face looked redder in contrast with his white bristles.

"Yes, in a week, maybe, or ten days at maist," repeated Dacre, with a very angry glance. "I — you — didn't I tell you so before?"

"Troth, sirs, this affair we must all admit is no that ill managed," said Gillespie; "a delicate matter, sirs, and deevilish weel managed. Mr. Goldshed will say so and what say you, Mr. Levi — the best cast ye've made this mony a day. Eh?"

"A long way, shirs, by a long chalk, Mr. Gillespie," said Mr. Levi, gravely shaking his black ringlets; "and I think it's only due to Mr. Dacre, we should drink his health, shir, like the rest, with all the honours, Mr. Gillespie."

"What for no," thundered Gillespie, "I gi' ye the health of our esteemed friend, Mr. Dacre. Mix yer brandy and water, will ye, ye neer-do-weel, Levi, and come, Mr. Larkin, where's yer tumbler? ay, we have it; come now, lad, we'll fit ye in a minute."

Mr. Larkin rosier than he was, perhaps, ever seen before, shook his head solemnly, and raised his large hands, also, in silence.

"And double-shotted," added Levi.

"Double-shotted," echoed the white-headed Scot. "What for no," and he half-filled Mr. Larkin's tumbler with whisky, and completed the bumper with punch.

But Mr. Larkin waved it back with a dignified abhorrence; in his present state he seemed to draw more upon gesture than language, and certainly was very red and pompous.

"Hout, fie, hout, fie, Mr. Larkin, ye'll not refuse, mon," cried Gillespie.

"Disagree, sir," murmured Larkin, loftily and thickly.

"Nonsense, mon, are ye daft?" whispered Gillespie, energetically, "drink your drap punch, sir, and don't anger the gentleman; ye'll no refuse, sir; why, mon, 'twad be the ruin 'o ye."

"And shleep here," said Levi, "theresh a nishie four-poshter in the front parlour; there he goesh all right."

"Vey unfair, sir, no' right, very wrong, I say," murmured Mr. Larkin, reproachfully.

"Now for it," cried Gillespie.

"Mind, gentlemen, I protest, and I'll — I'll shleep here, I think," said Mr. Larkin with a melancholy shake of his head, and he drank his tumbler of punch slowly, while Gillespie was making his speech, and he looked still redder and more solemn, and nothing would induce him to utter another word.

"He's afraid — lest he should forget himself and say a something true, the beast!"

So shouted Dacre, and with a savage laugh he ran downstairs and got into his brougham, and when the door was shut he buried his face in his hands.

"This is the last profanation. Oh, Laura, darling, forgive, forgive, forgive."

That night was a great scandal, I'm sorry to say, at the hotel of the unexceptionable Josiah Howard Larkin, Esq., of the Lodge, Brandon Park, Gylingdon, who was dropped at its door by a little Jew calling himself "the Rev. Tobiashe Philpott," who stated that he had stumbled upon him while lying in a state of insensibility, near the Black Jack tavern, in Milk Lane, in company with a Roman Catholic clergyman, and a billiard-marker, all suffering from overpowering indisposition. When the admirable gentleman was carried in by "boots" and the cabman, and placed upon a bench in the hall, his chin upon his breast, he smiled, murmuring indistinctly, "blessh ye, my friendsh, and r'memb'r I'm poorle — poorly, shir, vey poorle — wheresh th' pillow?"

This kind of babble, and a powerful fragrance of punch, aided the diagnosis of "boots," who, with the waiter, got him, faintly resisting, to his bed; and Mr. Larkin in the morning was more formal and reserved with the people of the inn than usual, and received a Wesleyan deputation on the subject of a chapel at Gylingdon, with a severe headache.



## CHAPTER XIV.

### DE BEAUMIRAIL SEES VISITORS.

DE Beaumirail the prisoner was ill next morning, but the malady of this scamp was, as beseemed it, very different from that of the serious attorney, who was bullied into an indiscretion, and received a Methodist deputation about the same hour, with a stupid punch headache throbbing in his temples.

De Beaumirail was moping about his room pale, dejected, and with a hectic in his cheek that made his eyes look strangely bright.

He saw his insolvent doctor dawdling about the court, and tapped a summons on the pane of glass with his pencil-case, and beckoned him to come up. With a lazy smile the doctor waved a salutation, and sauntered upstairs.

"You won't believe me," said the doctor, "but you're as full of hysteria as a schoolgirl, and you have a touch of that nasty sinking that so many poor devils get from being shut up too long in one place."

"I don't know how it is, doctor, but I do think there is something quite wrong here in my heart I think."

"Pooh," said the doctor, "your heart, indeed."

And he popped his ear to De Beaumirail's waistcoat, and listened for a while.

"No, sir, sound as a bell," said he, "but you oughtn't to be drinking that cursed tea in the morning, lowering the action of the heart, and working your nerves into hysteria. I can't get you to see that a regimen that would do you no harm if you were knocking about the world, won't, answer here, sir, especially after five or six years' incarceration. By Jove, sir, I've had to come under rule myself, a little gin-and-water, sir, I take, and I assure you the effect a glass or two produces is quite ridiculous, sir; there's no one feels for us, what's everybody's business, sir, is nobody's business, and so, sir, we are left here to rot under this murderous system and put to a slow — that's her, the new woman, is it? in the window — third from the corner — old: woman, the Dowager Lady Flammock, poor old devil! — put to a slow torture, sir, and killed by inches, for the crime of being poor!"

"A disgusting crime it is, doctor, we must admit," said De Beaumirail, with a shrug.

"It's an ill bird that fouls its own nest, sir," said the doctor; "rich people enough, sir, to speak ill of us, without *our* joining."

"Doctor," said he, "you're a goodnatured fellow, but I think there's something wrong; you fellows were never known yet to tell a man when there was anything amiss with his heart."

"Well, it's a nervous heart, and a weak heart, sir, that's all — and that's the reason, I'm always telling you to give up tea and cigars."

"You are a goodnatured fellow, very goodnatured, doctor. But upon my honour, you need not fancy you'd frighten me; there's nothing now within the circle of possibilities so welcome as death."

"There again, that's the way, sir, you depress your spirits, and if your spirits go down, the system goes down; it's only one thing of course, but still it's something," said the doctor.

"May I live a year?" asked De Beaumirail.

"Nonsense," said the doctor.

"Two?"

"Yes, three; you may live *thirty* years, sir, if you'll only be advised; you have just a nervous heart, don't you see; and if you persist in ill-treating it, why it may resent it, and organic disease, *might* result."

"Three years. Well, doctor, three years is a long day."

"And thirty is longer," said the doctor; "will you come out and take a little stroll up and down? There's sun on the other side of the court — summer, sir, beautiful."

"Thanks, no; I expect a friend here every moment."

"Well, my dear sir, you're not to let your spirits down, mind; and there's Mark Wagget looking for me. I'll run down, and you know where to find me, not a hundred miles from Farringdon-street, if you should happen to want me."

And with this joke, which did service pretty often, the doctor went downstairs whistling, and stumbled into the court, where he hailed his friend; and they strolled and shuffled about together, and seemed to have no lack of lazy banter, till Mark growing serious, pulled a coffee-stained *Times* out of his greatcoat pocket. A greatcoat with a hole in the elbow, was oddly enough, a garment which Mark had worn all that unusually hot summer — and the two luminaries under a bushel, put their heads together over an essay which affected them in their public capacity as prisoners in the Fleet, and nodded and talked over it earnestly.

De Beaumirail, in a blank state of mind, watching the consultation of these worthies, as he leaned against his window-shutter, was recalled to other things, by a knock at his door, and his gentle friend, good Mr. Parker, came in.

"My kind and good friend," said De Beaumirail, taking the old man's hand in both his own. "I can only say how infinitely obliged I am. Your letter reached me half an hour ago; you have done all I wished; you will understand hereafter how good a work you've aided. But, for *me* nothing good can ever come. Some few vain agitations, sir; I've always been sanguine, hope has been my intoxication, and I have drunk deep enough of the cup of madness. I shall taste it no more: a crisis with me is at hand, sir; the somnambulist you have known so long, is waked at last, and finds himself on the angle of a precipice from which there is no descent but to be dashed to pieces. Fancy three vultures, sir, and an eagle in the air employed to strike down quarry for them — it is a monstrous dream — all false but their cadaverous appetites. I'll write to you by-and-by; you'll understand our Christian friend, Larkin, better when I do; and, sir, I believe I shan't live very long; there's something fatal, something has begun, the seed is sown, and the harvest will soon be white for the reaper; perhaps I shan't see you again, sir, till you come to read your good books to me, which then, you know, I shan't have strength to escape from" — he smiled — "but meanwhile you'll write to me; I'll tell you what about — time enough."

He sighed deeply.

“I must have seemed often monstrously ungrateful, Mr. Parker, but it was not I; it was the bitterness and fury of my fate; thrust any man with energies and feelings into the solitude of prison for life, and what do you leave of him but his fiendish nature, with every good that ever qualified it corrupted to poison, or extinguished; but I believe, even devils can be grateful; grateful to you I know I was; but, then, you were my one friend. The last gleam of heaven that kept human sympathy alive within me, entered my door when you opened it, and I cling to your affection, as to a spar in shipwreck; and for the present — perhaps, sir, for ever — farewell.”

And so saying, De Beaumirail, in the foreign fashion, embraced his visitor.

## CHAPTER XV.

### TWICE GOODNIGHT.

THAT night, at his usual hour, Dacre arrived in the highest imaginable spirits at Guildford House.

"What a charming old house this is, there is something in it so *riant* and genial. Spirits of hope and gaiety haunt its passages, one runs up its stairs without touching them, as a lark flutters upwards to heaven, one crosses the floor to the measure of a dance, and its very walls seem humming to the vibrations of old music; and pray, forgive me, I'm talking such nonsense, trying to keep pace with my happiness, which quite outstrips my reason."

"Better to fall in love with our clumsy old house than to quarrel with the poor old thing, as some people do," said Laura Gray, "there's Lady Ardenbroke, who can't afford it a civil word."

"She's not content with calling it a nunnery, I assure you," interposed Mrs. Wardell; "she says it's a madhouse."

"Not quite a misnomer, while I am in it," laughed Dacre. "Sometimes, at least — to night, for instance — I am very mad; but very happy."

"And if one is to go mad there is no cause preferable, but it is not common; one does not meet many people who are suffering from too much happiness," said Mrs. Wardell.

"Madness is sometimes, I believe, hilarious enough, but is not brought on by overmuch joy; there is a reaction from misery, and even *in* misery that simulates gaiety. Heaven help us," said he, "a gaiety of nature in her irony — cynical as it subsides, insane as it rises. I think if I could have gaiety no otherwise, I should thank anyone for a flagon of laughing gas; dying wretches in the hospitals are heard to laugh in their dreams; but Mrs. Wardell's voice has waked me from mine." He sighed, and laughed, and sighed again.

"Sorry to hear it if it makes you less happy. If I thought I were making you dull here," said Mrs. Wardell, with an influx of dignity, "I should keep my remarks a good deal more to myself."

"How stupid of me to convey myself so ill," said Dacre, "I spoke only of those mad dreams which lead sleepwalkers to death. There are dreams of paradise — the most unreal, perhaps, of all; and from them no voice but one can recall us."

"Ain't we getting into the clouds, Mr. Dacre?" said Laura Gray. "I sometimes suspect you of having picked up some of Don Quixote's library in your travels."

"And read them to the same purpose?"

"No, for you seem a little conscious of your craze," said Challys.

"That's my misfortune; — than want of faith in one's insanity — what is there more miserable?" answered he.

"That depends, of course, on the nature of one's delusion," said she, "and now I'll talk no more nonsense, and by-and-by you'll sing us a song."

"Always command me," said he, lowering his voice as he came near her; "have I ever yet disobeyed you?"

"You have not always kept your promise," she answered.

"In what have I ever broken it to you?"

"In this very matter of music," she answered. "There have been evenings here, when I asked you to sing, when you promised to sing, and yet when you went away without singing."

"And if I did, you know, Miss Gray, it was some mischance, never from want of ardour in your service. You won't say that, Miss Gray, but believe, although I've never done you any service, yet I'd lay down my life for you — as, for you, I am laying down my last hope."

Laura Gray answered only by a steadfast and melancholy look, in which her beautiful eyes met his, and after a moment were lowered to the ground.

"And in whatever I promise to you, Miss Gray, or in your behalf, I will die rather than fail, and you will see how hard a trial I will yet endure for you. And now to begin, I'll sing, and *redeem* my promise."

The last words he spoke with a strange ardour full of a wild reproach.

A pretty Italian song. I don't know whether it has a place in any opera; I only know that it is one of my earliest acquaintances in that sort of melody — full of passion, melancholy and self-devotion. He sang —

"Giuro che ad altra mai  
La destra io porgero —  
Che a quei veziosi rai  
Sempre fidel sarò.  
Se del averso fato  
Vittima al fin' cadro.  
Col suo bell' nome amato  
Fra i labri io morerò."

Well did Challys Gray, as she sat by the window listening, know to what divinity the thrilling adoration of that passionate tenor was addressed. Never had she heard that voice so divinely melancholy and rapturous before — never perhaps before had it so moved her.

It ceased — there was silence — ever so little more, and she could not have restrained her tears — and then reserve and prudence farewell — where might she not have found herself? — the reserves and liberty of proud Challys Gray — all lost in a

moment. On what hysterical uncertainties sometimes hang life-long destinies, and even the courses of eternity.

In her silence was that trembling, when the breath is held, and the heart swells, and the eyes are filling. For worlds she would not have let him see how she was moved. Could she trust that half-deposed caution which her impulsive heart almost despised, and what pledges might not such a moment have given and taken, and so imperious, haughty Challys Gray would have promised herself away, without one of her difficulties answered, or a single mystery cleared up.

"Shall I sing it again?" he asked in a low tone, after an interval.

"No," said Challys Gray.

"You don't like it?"

"No, that is, I don't care about it."

"Really, Challys, you might be a little less, I had almost said *rude*, but certainly you are not very grateful, considering how beautifully it was sung," interposed Mrs. Wardell.

"No, I don't like it," repeated Challys impetuously. "I don't mean, of course, that Mr. Dacre did not sing it well; but I don't like the song, and that's the reason I say so when I'm asked. Will you sing something else, Mr. Dacre?"

"What shall it be?" asked he.

"Nothing sentimental — I mean in that strain. You sang some very pretty English ballads for us one night," she replied.

So he sang one of those which had pleased her.

"I may be wrong, Mr. Dacre, but I don't think, somehow, our music is *quite* so good as usual," said Challys Gray; "you won't mind my saying so; I don't know how it is — perhaps it is my fault — people are sometimes out of voice, and as often out of ear, I think. But it is not *that*," she said cruelly, "you are not singing well tonight, and I don't care to hear it. It is a vulgar taste I am sure, but I think I should like a foolish comic song this evening better than all the lovelorn ditties we could pick out of the whole circle of the Italian operas. I know you have not any, I'm only saying what a Vandal I am, but I daresay the Vandals had very good sense."

I don't know what thought may have prompted this sudden petulance. But Laura Gray's mind was in an odd state; all this time there was a great pain at her heart; she was angry, she did not well know at what, or with whom.

Dacre walked slowly over to the window. "I'm very sorry — I'm mortified — that I should, have acquitted myself so indifferently."

She made him no answer.

"But my singing, for a while, is over."

"How do you mean?"

"I can't come tomorrow, nor the next day, nor the day after. I can't see you again for some time — a short time, I hope — but I must deny myself — and — may I write? — I'll write, if you allow me, a very full letter."

Challys Gray looked very pale.

"And, pray, who imposes this absence upon you?" she asked a little haughtily, "and how can it interest us more than your other friends?"

They were talking low, and she glanced towards Julia Wardell, but that lady was deep in her novel.

"It is imposed upon me, Miss Gray, and it pains me to think I shan't be missed here, for except you, I have scarcely on earth another friend."

"You had no business, sir," said imperious little Challys Gray, "to decide on any such thing without first consulting your friends."

This, it must be allowed, was a very inconsistent speech.

"My friends, as a rule, seem to care so little what becomes of me, that my consulting them would have been a very great presumption," said Alfred Dacre a little bitterly.

"Perhaps it would, or very likely you *have* consulted them. It is very impertinent of me to talk about it; your time and plans are, of course, your own, and I don't *desire* to be one of those people who engage in the thankless office of advising others, and I shan't, though, indeed, I have not been asked; and if it is not very rude, is it not very near your usual hour of leaving us?"

Dacre smiled reproachfully.

"The hour to which you usually permitted my stay has not not quite arrived," he said, gently, "but even were it less clear that the time when I *ought* to go has come, I should have had to take my leave. I *must* go earlier than usual this evening. I need not say how much more painful than I expected my departure has become."

"You seem to wish to go, Mr. Dacre, and there is no reason why you should not be gone this moment. Pray do go."

"You are displeased with me, Miss Gray."

"Displeased, sir! you talk to me as if I had a right to be pleased or displeased with you in matters that concern yourself only. I don't know what you mean."

"May I write to you, Miss Gray?"

"No, Mr. Dacre; there's no occasion to write."

"Do you really refuse me that very humble privilege?"

"It is better not, Mr. Dacre. I mean, it would only be a trouble, and I don't wish it," she said, imperiously.

He looked at her beautiful and spirited face, darkly and sadly.

"From this hour, Challys, my sorrow dates."

"You can't blame us," said Challys Gray, haughtily; "and — and — Mr. Dacre, pray don't run a risk of being late for your business."

"May I write?" he pleaded.

"I've said already, I prefer your not writing — I don't choose it — it shan't be, Mr. Dacre."

"I think you are very cruel. I ought to have known it; but I have quite made up my mind."

He stood leaning at the window, and looked out; a shadow of care had overcast him, and it seemed to her, under that gloom, that his face was growing like that of Leonora's phantom trooper, paler, and thinner, and sterner, from minute to minute.

"Made up your mind, Mr. Dacre! To what?"

"To disobey you."

"To write, you mean?"

"Yes — for one thing, I'll write."

"Does not it strike you, sir, that nothing can be more insolent? And I'll tell you what I shall do — for I've made up my mind, also — if you should presume to do so, the moment I see from whom it comes I'll burn it unread."

With these words she rose, and walked quickly out of the room.

Julia Wardell had dropped into one of her naps. Dacre had forgot her presence. His face was pale and resolute, and his eyes gleamed with the light of excitement, as he took a last look down the avenue in which stood his carriage. There was a little moonlight this night. He looked at his watch, and then he drew a paper from the pocket in the breast of his coat. He opened it, and, having read a few words, replaced it.

Then he suddenly recollected worthy Julia Wardell.

Seeing that she was asleep, he stole lightly across the floor, and let himself softly out of the room.

He had hardly entered the lobby when Laura Gray ran down the stairs. She looked sad and gentle.

"Mr. Dacre, I'm so glad — you wont remember what I said tonight — and you'll write to me — wont you? — and I was very cross — but I was vexed — and I could not part without saying this — and we are quite good friends again? — ain't we?"

"And I'm forgiven? — and I'll write and — explain everything; and then you'll see how inevitable was the reserve of which you complained — and I think — you'll pity me."

"Good night," she said.

He pressed the hand she gave him to his lips, and, hastily drawing it away, she repeated, "Good night," and ran up the stairs. He looked after her, in silence; and then he turned, and went down to the hall.

Challys Gray had placed herself at the lobby window above that near which their parting had been. She was waiting to see him come down the steps, and to see the last of him, as he passed down the avenue.

She waited there minute after minute, for a long time, in this expectation. But Mr. Dacre did not emerge from the house.

## CHAPTER XVI.

### IN WHICH MR. DACRE FAINTS.

ON arriving at the foot of the stairs at Guildford House, you find yourself looking toward the hall-door, at the entrance of a spacious hall. There is a back hall, considerably smaller than this, visible under an arch, and with a second door, opening upon a terrace, which exactly faces the hall-door.

When Dacre had reached the foot of the stairs there was no one in the hall. He walked a few steps cautiously into it. From the pocket of his great coat he took one of those instruments which were then known as "night-protectors," formed of a strong piece of whalebone, with a nob of lead at each end, and all whipped over with catgut, like the handle of a riding-whip. The great coat he left where it hung, and took merely his wideawake hat. Then he stood still for a moment, and looked toward the terrace-entrance with a sharp glance, listening intently. There was neither sight nor sound to alarm him.

In a moment more he had opened and closed the door, and jumping from the terrace to the lower level of the grass, he listened again, under shelter of the overhanging balustrade.

It was a pause only of a second. With swift steps he reached the stable-door. It opened with a latch.

"Anyone here?" he asked, as he entered.

There was no answer. He passed through and found himself in a paved stableyard. Here he repeated his question again without an answer.

The door opening upon the stable lane was fast, but the key was in the lock. Again Dacre looked at his watch. The momentous hour had just arrived. There was exactly time to reach the point of safety, if all went smoothly.

Stern and sharp were the features of the young man as he looked up and down the carriageway leading from the stables.

This was a much wider road than Brompton lanes, especially stable-lanes, were wont to be, and had been laid out probably at first for a line of dwelling-houses, and a lordly row of old elm trees rose dimly into the moonlight from the other side, and the buildings that abutted on it at the side on which he stood were old-fashioned gateways or gables of stable-buildings, some of which were overgrown with ivy.

Not a human being was moving on this pretty and melancholy old road, and not a sound audible but the baying of a watchdog, and the faint clink of his own steps.

He knew the geography of this road perfectly; in fact, he had studied it as a general does the scene of his operations. About two hundred steps higher up, it opened upon a road parallel to the great Brompton highway.

If he could reach that corner unobserved, five minutes more would bring him to a cabstand, and then one long straight pull of half an hour or less, and if money could make "the mare go," the cab and its freightage would be at the right minute at its destination.

Under the shadow of the buildings, with a light and quick tread, he walked. He had not gone fifty yards, however, when a whistle from the road behind him, and answered from the point to which he was tending, pierced him with a chill misgiving.

In a situation so intensely critical, the bravest man is liable to unacknowledged tremors, such as in ascertained and open danger on the field would never approach him. He might as well be shot as delayed. All depended on two hundred steps.

Looking over his shoulder he saw two figures approaching from the lower end of the road, and before him were also two — one some little way in advance of the other.

His heart swelled and fluttered for an instant, and then came the cold intense resolution of an adventurous man who is in for a crisis of danger. He saw that these persons were approaching at a rapid pace from either end, and would surround him by the time they had reached the centre.

This manœuvre, at all events, should not succeed. He seized the Napoleonic plan of taking the enemy in detail, and with his loaded whalebone in his grasp dashed onward to meet the foremost of his adversaries. He ran at the top of his speed; the enemy hesitated; with his left hand he flourished a ribbon of paper, in the other he grasped a thick bludgeon, and cried —

"You know me well, sir, there's no use — you're had."

But Mr. Dacre's onset was not to be so stayed. There was not a moment to spare, for the other fellow was running up, and Alfred Dacre had closed and struck before he was on the field. It was well, perhaps, for both parties that the man ducked at the moment that his blow descended. It struck off his hat, with no further damage, and our young friend, who, with all his foreign refinement, showed the skill of an English boxer, before the man had quite recovered his equilibrium, struck him a tremendous blow with his fist between the eyes, and down went his foremost foe with a stunning pound upon the road.

The "reserve," who witnessed this disaster, now not three yards in his van, pulled down his hat, halted, and whirled his stick in the air. At him sprang our hero, but before he reached came a sound like a bat on the cricket-ball, and our handsome friend, stricken from behind, fell upon his shoulder, and rolled round upon his back, white and ghastly in the moonlight, and with a gush of blood trickling in a divided rivulet over his forehead and face.

Our handsome tenor lay there, in dreamland, or, for aught they knew, dead. No trace of sternness in his face; sad and gentle as a sick child's sleep were the features on which the moon now shone, and his long silken lashes showed very prettily on the deathlike cheek below his closed eyes.

Laura Challys Gray was in her drawingroom, hardly two hundred steps away. What would she have thought of this tableau?

"Well, 'twas him took to that work first," said the man with whom he had been on the point of closing. "He'd spar — that ere chap; that was a teaser he lent Jim. All right again, Jim?"

This polite inquiry from his brother beak did not elicit a reply from Jim, whose temper seemed to be a little soured.

"I shay, Jim, run you round and fetch the brougham. This here gent's got it rather 'eavy, and we'll want to give him a hairing to-wards the city; or if you'd rayther, Tom can go — a bit queerish, I desshay?" said Mr. Levi.

"What's this? *I shay!* devilish well he didn't give you a fillip with this ere feather," continued the Jew, taking up the weapon that lay on the ground beside Dacre's head, and jerking it lightly in the air. "Mind, Tom, where we found it. If anything goesh wrong with this queer fellow it will show the people what a lamb he vas."

Then stooping over Mr. Dacre, the Jew insinuated his long fingers into his breastpocket, and drew out thence a paper, which, touching the blood on his cheek and forehead, as Mr. Levi plucked it forth, required to be shaken in the air, and opened gingerly to save that nice gentleman from dabbling his fingers.

Over this paper the Jew sneered, and grinned, and snorted. It was the passport of Guy De Beaumirail to Paris.

"I wish you a very pleasant trip, Mr. De Beaumirail; but you'll want a bit of bazhilicon for your poor head first; a very pleasant journey; you do look a deal too lively for London. Paris is the ground for you; but it's hard to tear yourself away from the sheenes of sho many agreeable years, and you'll put it off for a day or two, wont you, and jusht shleep another night or two in the jolly old Fleet?"

Just at this moment the young man sat up and looked before him with a dazed wild stare, and said hurriedly —

"Where is he?"

"Who'sh he?" inquired Mr. Levi.

"The stick! — the — why — oh! it's all right — where — that's you Levi — am I hit? By Jove — ha! ha! ha! I'm bleeding a bit. I — I say it's all fair; have you a little water?"

"Well get it on the way *home*" sneered the Jew, with a long-drawn drawl on the emphatic word. "Buckets o' wa-ter. Great pity you're not on your way to Paris *via* Havre — ain't it?"

"All fair, sir; I don't complain — the fortune of war," said the wounded knight, with a feeble laugh. "A little trick — mine and countermine. Was it you who shot me, Mr. Levi?"

"The bullet that shot you is made of oak — a tap of Tom Burster's switch."

"Well — I don't grumble; and — and here's the carriage — quite fair; but — I'm a little thirsty. A fellow might have a glass of water, don't you think? Very quickly done, sir — ha! ha! ha!" and the laugh trembled into a groan, and the young gentleman fainted — I suppose from loss of blood.

Levi was beginning to grow a little uncomfortable. It would have been decidedly awkward if the prisoner had died of his wound, in their hands.

After a little time he recovered consciousness, and this time got some water to drink, and said —

"Well, as I can't go to Paris this time, I suppose I had better return to my castle. Tell them, in heaven's name, to drive quick, and get it over soon."

So they got him in, and escorting him in a body, drove rapidly toward the famous prison in Farringdon-street.

De Beaumirail said nothing till he reached the well-known door.

"Well, here's the cage, and my wings pretty well clipt."

So, he got out, and wiped his face with his handkerchief, and a faint groan escaped him. But his spirit was not subdued. He held himself erect and smiling, and staggered through the hatch and the corridor, and even whistled an air as he went up stairs; and on getting into his room, he fainted again.

## CHAPTER XVII.

### ON AGAIN.

No news, of course, of Dacre next day at Guildford House. None was to have been looked for; and yet Laura Gray was restless, and looking out from the windows, and could not be still for a moment.

To Mrs. Wardell she had never disclosed her secret. That kind old soul thought her, indeed, often rather hard upon Dacre, and took up the cudgels for him, never suspecting.

"Where is he? — what can it be? — could not he have written just a line? — I told him to write; — I think, whatever it is, he might have managed one line."

All that time De Beaumirail, whom we know better as Alfred Dacre, was feverish Still, the perspective was not quite void. There was one last object — and something to interest — at least for a time. A day or two after, De Beaumirail, still very pale, had thrown himself on his sofa, and was expecting, by his own appointment, a visit from the persons who had foiled his escape, and were, probably, in no pleasant temper, as respected him.

These three gentlemen entered his room in silence, and with countenances, after their varieties, more or less threatening. Mr. Gillespie and Mr. Levi, uninvited, pulled chairs to the table, and grimly sat down. Mr. Larkin, who, whatever he might think of M; de Beaumirail, could never forget that he was himself a Christian gentleman, was the only one of the three visitors who saluted him — and a very dignified and withering bow it was.

"AU in the dumps, gentlemen — myself included. Let's see if we can't make ourselves a little more cheerful before we separate."

"Gammon," said Mr. Levi, under his breath, with a rather furious gleam in his sullen eyes.

"We're not likely to be over cheerful, I thank ye, Mr. Beaumirail; I never was mair disgusted, sir, in a' my life."

"We conceived, sir," said Mr. Larkin, "that dealing as gentlemen, there was a confidence on which we might mutually rely. Every gentleman is aware of the kind of feeling — of course there's something higher, I hope, than any mere wordly code — but that is not for every one. I did, however, implicitly rely upon that delicacy — that — a — a — delicacy—"

"Well, you see it was not one of the delicacies of the season, as the Lord Mayor says," interposed De Beaumirail.

"A delicacy which is implied in the term honour, Mr de Beaumirail — *honour* — sir," repeated Mr. Larkin, with a melancholy severity.

"Honour among thieves — I know — and I don't dispute it — I've behaved very ill, but I'll make amends."

The gentlemen all looked at him fixedly.

"I've come off second best — I don't complain; we were playing a sharp and hard game. It wasn't ill played at either side, and I lost, that's all," said De Beaumirail.

Mr. Levi sneered sullenly.

"Yes, I've got a rap over the head, and I forgive you."

"We advanced you money, Mr. Beaumirail," said Levi, reproachfully.

"I'm willing to return you everything you gave me, punctually, even that knock over the head, if you like it," said De Beaumirail.

"Chaff, d — chaff, when business is on," said Mr. Levi. "And we bought up them debts with *thoushands* of capital, sir, shpeculating on that marriage, and only I got a hint of your minewvers you'd a carried your pint and mizzled!" and Mr. Levi clenched this energetic speech with an oath.

"Why this business is worth to you gentlemen, how much? and to me, at least, the same, and *liberty*. I think *there's* some guarantee for sincerity. Come, gentlemen, I'm your most obedient humble servant once again."

"And what did you mean by that deevil's trick, sir?" demanded Mr. Gillespie.

"Suppose I meant to try whether I couldn't have it all to myself. Wolves, sir — all wolves — we're a greedy little pack, gentlemen; but I've got a lesson."

"You'd like to be on again, is that it?" asked Mr. Levi.

"On again! Of course I would — in fact, I must — and so must you. You can't afford to lose all that money. I can't afford to lose all I'm to gain, along with my liberty and my life — I'm talking coarsely to you, gentlemen, to make myself intelligible — you wish it as much as I. I hate the routine affectation of indifference — it always delays, and sometimes loses a bargain."

"If it's ever on again — which I'm -doubtful — for myself and guv'nor — we'll want to be sharp and wideawake," said Mr. Levi.

"I confess, gentlemen, I have a very unpleasant feeling about this business. I shall, if you wish it, consider the subject; — but I don't conceal from myself the extremely painful character of the recent occurrence, and I am bound, in frankness to all parties, to say, that my present feeling is to consider the matter as at an end, to act upon my detainers strictly, and to direct my attention to bringing to light, and, of course, into court, the foreign property of the gentleman with whom I have had the honour, for a time, to act, and which, I have some reason to think, is, by no means so inaccessible or inconsiderable as it was represented to us."

"You'll not object, Mr. Larkin, to come into the next room, and talk a bit wi' me and Mr. Levi."

So spoke Mr. Gillespie; and, taking Mr. Larkin's assent pretty much for granted, he led the way into M. de Beaumirail's bedroom; and, without ceremony, his companions followed him, leaving De Beaumirail, perfectly indifferent about that impertinence, and lost in a profound reverie.

"I won't allow myself to hope; — no, there's no hope; and poor old Parker will have nothing to tell me — nothing."

He sighed profoundly, and walked to the window, for he expected a visit from his old friend, and stood gazing anxiously into the yard.



While he thus waited a knock came to his door, and a letter. It was from old Mr. Parker, and said —

“As I shall be unable to call at your rooms to-day, and, knowing that you will naturally be impatient to learn the result of my visit to Guildford House, I write to say that I saw Miss Gray to-day, and strictly regulated what I said upon your wishes, but quite unsuccessfully — the absolute secrecy as to your identity, which you imposed upon me, I, of course, observed. I confined myself to ascertaining whether her feelings with respect to Mr de Beaumirail had undergone any favourable change, whether she would enter on a discussion of his character and conduct, and whether any persuasion would induce her to tolerate an interview, however short, with him. I was not left many minutes in doubt upon any one of these points. No good can possibly come of any attempt to lead her into an interview. In her present temper nothing could be more painful and fruitless. I humbly pray the Almighty that He will be pleased to dispose her heart more charitably, and so in His own good time He may — at present it would be vain and even mischievous to press it.”

And so with regrets and condolences the kind old man closed his letter.

“I am not disappointed — blessed are they who expect nothing — not the least.” But his face looked paler and sharper, and he sighed again from his troubled heart.

“All’s over, *quite*.”

And he walked to the chimneypiece, as if in search of something there, and a pale, patient smile, gleamed on his face, and he repeated “quite;” and he wandered away to his mahogany bookcase, and there he read the backs of the books without remembering what he read, every now and then repeating gently, “quite;” and he heard the voices of his three visitors, whom he had forgotten, babbling inside, and waking up, he cursed them intensely under his breath.

“Three long heads in there; it will be some comfort to knock them together, as *I* shall; yes, *you* may *lay* them together, gentlemen, but I’ll knock them together, with a clink that will leave a headache behind it for sometime to come. That little Jew that looks as if he’d poison his mother for three half-crowns; and that conceited, stony-hearted, Scotch skinflint, Gillespie — and Larkin! I hold my peace at Larkin; no one but Satan could describe Mr. Larkin.

“To think of me here! And the mean dogs that are everywhere prosperous, and I, punished so inexorably for a few boyish follies! — fortune — health — liberty — the only good hope that ever approached me — all taken in cold blood; and I without a friend I may say, compelled to associate with such indescribable beasts!”

De Beaumirail ground his teeth with actual fury, and with one enraged spurn of his heel dashed in the door with a noise that made them jump.

“On or off — are you tongue-tied — delay twenty seconds longer, and *I* declare off, and, by Heaven, *nothing* shall move me after.”

Mr. Levi, who was of an excitable temperament, had jumped from his seat, and was standing with his fists clenched as the door flew open. Mr. Larkin cowering in his chair, was staring at the same object, with a flushed frown on his forehead, in the sudden conviction that De Beaumirail had shot himself with a pistol.

“Canny, there lad, canny,” bawled Mr. Gillespie, whose nerves were also ajar.

“Come, gentlemen, these are my rooms, if you please, and I choose to be alone,” said De Beaumirail, who was growing palpably dangerous.

Mr. Larkin rose with a lofty carelessness, and with a slight waive of his large hand towards Mr. Gillespie, he said grandly —

“You can state my views, Mr. Gillespie. I leave myself as to our joint answer to Mr de Beaumirail, unhesitatingly in your hands, sir;” and so Mr. Larkin, who had an objection to a *fracas* (which he called a fraycass), got out of the room with rather a brighter colour, and as grandly as he could.

“Well, Mr. Beaumirail,” said Gillespie, putting on his white felt hat, and taking his worsted gloves and stick, “we’re amost decided, for once more, to trust you, sir — that is,” he added cautiously, “about as far as I’d throw a bull by the tail, Mr. Beaumirail, ha, ha, ha. I mean, sir, we’ll tak more care, sir, we’ll tak more care, sir, and sleep with one eye open, ye ken; we must bring down half a dozen of our people, mind ye, every time you go down to that place at Brompton; you oblige us, ye see, to be sharp, sir, and that will cost us a handsome penny, but we’ll mak trial o’t for a couple of times more, jest — and — that’s all.”

“*Once* more is enough,” said De Beaumirail sharply.

“Well, well, Mr. Beaumirail, that’s bringin’ matters to a point,” said Mr. Gillespie, in a more conciliatory tone, “ye’r talking sense noo, sir, if ye can stick to it— “

“Time we should wind up, and get shomething out of the fire — a d — d long up-hill game it hash been to me and the guv’nor,” said Mr. Levi, who never allowed that anything paid him; and took what fortune gave him, and, as Mr. Gillespie would have said, “kept aye grumblin’.”

## CHAPTER XVIII.

### THE KNIGHT OF THE SILVER DRAGON APPEARS.

THIS day an unexpected visitor was seen at Guildford House. Charles Mannering, thin and pale, alighted at the door, and Laura, at the window, could scarcely believe her eyes. She flew down stairs and met him in the hall.

"I'm so delighted you've come back from the wars, you poor wounded soldier! we must nurse you, and drive you about wherever you like, and take such care of you. Julia Wardell is the best nurse in the world. Don't come upstairs, it will tire you — you shall come into the library. She'll be back again soon. She went out about an hour ago for a drive, and I'm so glad to see you here again — honest old Charlie."

"Are you really?" he said, smiling in great felicity, as he held her hands in both his; "I'm so much obliged, and so happy, you can't think."

So in he went to the library, and there was a great deal, you may be sure, to be asked and answered, and at last he said —

"By-the-bye, is Mr. Dacre in town?"

To which, looking down for a moment as she did so, she answered, after her wont, quite truly —

"I really don't know."

And looking up suddenly, with flaming cheeks, she asked in turn, with a grave defiance —

"Why do you inquire? Have you heard anything new about him?"

"Well, no," said he, "that is, more properly, yes and no."

"No man ever comes into this house," said Challys Gray impetuously, "but he instantly begins to talk in riddles — riddles ascending through all degrees of perplexity, until they reach the climax, like this of simple absurdity. How *can* any honest question be truly answered by 'yes and no'?"

"Well, it's plain you give it up," he said, laughing. "So what I mean is this — I have learned nothing more about him distinctly, but I have received a very distinct caution."

"Oh, I know; that was, of course, from Ardenbroke," she said, looking at him with eyes not to be evaded.

"Why should you suppose Ardenbroke?" demanded he.

"Because Ardenbroke wrote a very unaccountable letter about him before," she replied, "in fact, I think a most inexcusable letter — I mean from a person who had described himself as Mr. Dacre's friend. *You*, of course, have your own ideas of friendship; they don't quite agree with ours. We women never run down unoffending people as you do. You may say what you like, but we are not only more generous, but infinitely more just. And what did Ardenbroke say? or is the caution intended for us or for Mr. Dacre's tailor? I think you'll allow the whole thing does very nearly approach impertinence, not to say outrage."

"Well, recollect I don't say who it is," began Charles Mannering.

"But there's no good in denying; I know it was Ardenbroke; and what did lie say?" insisted Challys Gray.

"Well, whoever gave me this warning," he began —

"I'll promise you not to mention the subject to him, if you'll only tell me plainly that it was Ardenbroke. I know it was; and I'll attack him very fiercely, I can tell you, when he comes back, unless you tell me," interrupted Laura.

"If I tell you who it was," said Charles, giving way, "will you promise, quite seriously, not to betray your knowledge to the person who wrote?"

"Yes — I don't mind — certainly — I promise," said Laura.

"Well, on that condition, it *was* Ardenbroke," he answered.

"I knew it was. Didn't I say so half a dozen times?" said Laura; "and now tell me what he says. Have you got his letter here?"

"No; but I remember everything exactly."

"Well, pray go on."

"He told me to take an opportunity of talking to you. Perhaps if he had known," said Charles, looking down, with a little embarrassment — "I mean if he had thought how very little right I have to speak to you, Challys, on any such subject, he would have chosen some one else; but he has put it upon me so much in the way of a duty that I could hardly evade it."

"If solemnity is a recommendation I think he could hardly have chosen his ambassador better," said Miss Gray.

"Even that is something," said Charles, smiling sadly, "when one's chance of being of use depends on being known to be in earnest."

There was a latent sarcasm in the look which Challys Gray turned upon him, which was cruel.

"In that, perhaps, though in no other respect, such a messenger as he might have chosen," said Charles, tranquilly.

"If sage advice could make one wise, I should be the wisest girl in England," said Challys Gray.

"I venture no advice, pray remember; it comes all from Ardenbroke. I do not know even the facts on which he seems to found it. I only know the conclusion he presses, and that he is extremely anxious as well as earnest."

"Well, and where is this earnest and anxious gentleman? If he is in London I think he might have saved you the trouble of remembering his lecture, and come here to speak for himself. I don't mean, Charlie," she said, observing something like a pained smile as he looked down, "that you could not say it just as well as he — perhaps better, but a lecture is a lecture, and a bore at best; and I think it is hardly fair to arrange that I should have this one twice over — first from his ambassador, and afterwards from himself — and — I really don't know what to think. There never was a poor creature, I believe, so worried as I am."

Challys Gray was curious, and yet reluctant — she complained of being so addressed, and yet wished intensely to hear the message.

"My dear Laura, don't fancy that I urge you. I thought it was quite the other way; and, unless you command me, one word on the subject I shan't say. In fact, as I said before, I have not the least right, except on these terms, to mention it again."

"Now, you want to provoke me," said Challys Gray; "pray, let there be no more about it, but tell me — I'm sure it is disagreeable — what *has* got into Ardenbroke's head?"

"Well, it is just this — I can only tell you in a very general way, for I am quite in the dark as to his reasons: — He says that he would give a great deal to come up to London, and will, the very moment he has his second consultation about that Scotch property; and he says, in these words, as nearly as I can remember, 'If Challys Gray has any friend near her — and I think you are one — he will not fail to entreat her to drop the person who calls himself Alfred Dacre. I made a foolish promise which embarrasses me though only a little; but, if I were assured that he was availing himself of my silence to insinuate himself into an intimacy in that house, I should not hesitate a moment about letting Challys know all about him. I hinted a good deal before. It is quite true what I said in his favour. But that is *all* that *can* be said in his favour, and when I said it I had no idea that he dreamed of introducing himself on a footing of intimate acquaintance in my cousin's house.'"

"Upon my word, you seem to remember his periods wonderfully," said Miss Gray, who was vexed and embarrassed. "What a capital actor you would have made."

"A slower study, I'm afraid, than you think, Challys. From the moment his letter reached me, yesterday afternoon, I don't think one of my waking hours has passed without my conning over these sentences."

"Is there any more?" asked Challys.

"Yes; just an earnest request that as he could not well ask his mother, old Lady Ardenbroke—"

"Did he say *why*?"

"He seemed to hint that old ladies talk, and that it would be everywhere."

"Yes, I know; and what more?"

"An earnest entreaty that I would see you; and his expression was to implore of you to quite give up Mr. Dacre's acquaintance, and on no account to permit him to — to write to you."

"Oh! nonsense — *write*. Mr. Dacre used, as you saw, just to drop in for an hour or so, and sing a little. What a fuss! and besides, Mr. Dacre has not been here for — I forget how long — and did not Ardenbroke say that all he said of him — in his favour, I mean — was quite true? you said so."

"Yes, he does," said Charles.

"Well, so far as my acquaintance is likely to go, that is quite enough. If he is a gentleman — accomplished — well-connected. But, perhaps it is assumed that I am in love with him," said Miss Gray, with a laugh, but very pale; "and that he is one of those charming gentlemen who go about in romances and melodramas, if nowhere else, making irresistible pretty speeches to adoring young ladies, and having all the time a wife or a skeleton locked up in a closet."

"Oh, no; it ain't that," said he.

"How do you know? what could be worse?" she answered again with a little laugh.

"I — the fact is — I had heard a story, but it was of a Mr. Dacre — Alfred Dacre. But Ardenbroke speaks of him as calling himself Alfred Dacre, from which it is plain that whether he be a Dacre at all, with some *other* Christian name, he certainly is not *Alfred* Dacre; and so my story is worthless. And when I wrote to Ardenbroke, I asked him" — Charles looked aside a little bashfully as he made this confession — "whether this gentleman calling himself Alfred Dacre was married, and he said positively not; and he had very lately heard every particular about him."

"Well, you may tell him, we're in no danger here, and that so far from having to deny ourselves to Mr. Dacre, he seems to have quite other people to look after, for we have not seen him here, as I told you, for some time."

And then, at Laura's instance, the patient had a glass of sherry and a biscuit, and described to her his present quarters near Highgate, and told her all the little news about himself. And though he made nothing of it, he looked pale and thin, and little more than half way on the road to recovery.

So Challys said that she and Julia Wardell would drive out some day soon, to see old Mr. Plumtree's wonderful garden, in which Charles was wont to lounge with his tweed plaid about him, on a rustic seat, reading his novel in the luxury of a listless invalid.

## CHAPTER XIX.

### A HAPPY HOUR.

A WEEK and more had passed, and no news of Alfred Dacre. Guildford House was sad, and never did time move in that dull mansion more slowly before.

Now and then Julia Wardell wondered whether he would ever write again, spoke dryly of his politeness, and expressed her impetuous wonder at the want alike of indignation and of kindness manifested, as she complained, by Challys Gray.

"It certainly is," she would say sarcastically to Challys Gray, "a very enviable state to be in. No affront has the slightest effect upon you! Could anything be ruder than Mr. Dacre's walking off as he has done, after all the — the —"

"Tea — ?" said Challys Gray.

"Well, the tea was not much to talk about; but the attention, and the agreeable evenings; and, in fact, his making quite a resource of this house, and coming here to chat and sing whenever he pleased; and I do say that going off as he has done, without explanation or even farewell — why he did not say so much as good night. I was just thinking for a minute or two about something, and when I raised my eyes he had slipped out of the room; and not a line since — not a word., I do assure you, whatever you may think, I look on it as one of the rudest, coolest proceedings I ever remember hearing of."

"I daresay; but that's very much his own business. It certainly does not matter much to us whether he is the flower of courtesy — isn't that what Sancho Panza calls his master — or the most illbred —"

"He ain't that," interposed Mrs. Wardell. "The most illbred person in London, if we are never to see him again," continued Miss Gray. "So I shan't trouble my head about it."

"You certainly do take it very coolly, considering that the poor young man may have met with some accident, or even lost his life; for I am quite sure that something must have prevented his calling here, or writing — and something very unusual, or he would have been certain to let us hear; and I'm quite uncomfortable about him; and I envy you the charming apathy with which you consign our friends to the chances of this reckless town, in which I am told, there are nine hundred accidents a week."

"Perhaps, dear Julia, I am a stock or a stone; but how can I help that. I did not make myself, and I really can't get either into a passion or a misery about nothing. He'll come back if he wishes, and if he doesn't he won't; and if you *will* have him dead, I humbly *hope* he won't. A little time will bring all to light."

"Well, I suppose it will. I wish you weren't looking so pale, my dear. I have been telling you, you can't be quite well, looking so poorly."

"I am, notwithstanding, quite well, I assure you," she protested. "You'll put me quite out of conceit with myself if you go on telling me that I'm losing my looks."

"Come with me to Lady Ardenbroke's tonight — there's a good child. She'll be so disappointed; and I don't think there will be six people there."

"No, dear, I shan't go."

"What an obstinate little thing it is?"

"At what hour do you go?" asked Miss Gray.

"Nine — very early. She's an invalid still, you know."

"I shall see you before twelve, then. Give her my love, and tell her that when it came to the hour I found I could not change my mind, I really can't, you know. She's very goodnatured; but she has made a little plan to steal me into society, and she would succeed before I knew where I was; and then, farewell all comfort in existence. No, I'll remain here; and if we change this drowsy life it shall be to travel — a state in which you can see everything and yet be solitary, and quite enjoy your liberty."

"I suppose, then, there's no good in my saying any more?" Mrs. Wardell looked at her, still in hope.

"None in the world, dear; and I see the carriage, and it is nearly dark; and you had better get your cloak on. Aunt Winnie is sometimes cross, you know, when people keep her waiting."

So, in a few minutes more good Mrs. Wardell was gone, and Laura Gray stood quite alone at the drawingroom window.

The shades of night stole gradually over the homely old house. The mist hung on the grass, and floated among the stems of the ancient elms, and the darkness deepened under their boughs.

The pretty lane in front was by this time quite silent. Leaning lightly against the side of the window, she was looking quite sadly and subdued, down that dark vista where midway his carriage-lamps used to shine on nights like this.

"He'll never come again — never."

And still she listened and watched; and I know not what fancies chased one another through her pretty head, and what yearnings were at her heart. In this lonely musing nearly half an hour passed, and she turned away with a deep sigh, and sitting down in a low chair took a book. I don't think she read a great deal — and more than once she sighed, and again fell into her reverie.

I wish I could say that she was interrupted in some more romantic way. The fact is the door opened, and the servant announced Mr. Dacre.

She raised her head, and saw him standing at the open door with his accustomed smile.

There was silence for a little while —

"I havn't written — I preferred coming; and beside I couldn't write," said he. "It is so much pleasanter and wiser to talk. A letter, you know, is blind and deaf, and neither sees when you look weary, nor hears when you say 'enough', but bores on with inflexible stupidity till it has quite said out its say; and for this, and a thousand better reasons, I'm glad I did not write."

- "Oh yes, I always think so," said Challys Gray, scarcely knowing what she said. "I never write a note when I can help it. It is so much better — one can *say* everything so much more easily."

"This drawingroom, this room—" "he was looking round it in a wild reverie—" "what a dream it all is! and, oh, Miss Gray, this hour. I'm to sing for you, mind, as usual, and to talk — all just in the old way it shall be; and it has been to me a year since I saw you."

"It is, you know, a good many days," said Challys Gray; "and — we are not to talk in a melancholy way; and now have I any news to tell — nothing, I think, except, indeed, this, that my cousin Julia has gone to drink tea with Lady Ardenbroke this evening; but she'll not be very long away; and her dog is quite recovered; and the old cracked china vase you used to admire is broken, and gone to some wonderful woman in Long-acre, who puts all the bits together again, and makes annihilation harmless."

"You'll tell me where to find her?"

"Are you going to put her skill in requisition?"

"Yes."

"What have you broken?"

"A trifle called a heart — my own — and so I had a right to break it."

"It must have been very ill constructed; Those ornaments should be made quite solid, and they would be less liable to accidents," said Laura.

"Yes, made of stone, I daresay. And now, for my little time, I'm going to be quite happy, that is to say, quite mad."

"That sounds very wild, Mr. Dacre; yet, I daresay, there is some truth in it," and she laughed. "People, I suppose, can only be happy by imagining something, and forgetting a great deal?"

"Yes, Miss Gray," said he, "one can forget a great deal, but never everything; like others we long for the lotus; but who would quite forget? It is to its saddest records that memory clings most fondly. I suppose by the time life turns into a retrospect every memory has some one melancholy treasure, the secret of all its pain, from which it would not part for all its other stores. But I'm not going to be sad. I'll wear my fool's-cap, if you allow me, this evening, and you won't despise me if my music is mingled with its bells. And — and you have been quite well ever since?"

"Yes, thanks; very well."

"And the invalid of the Silver Dragon —"

"Recovering very fast," she replied; but he perceived that she was embarrassed as she answered, and his eye rested with a quiet curiosity upon her for a moment or two, before he spoke.

"Recovering, recovering; yes, its time he should; he has been out, has he, and here?"

"Yes, only once, for twenty minutes or so, and he has established himself somewhere at Highgate," said Miss Gray.

"And talked of me?" said the gay man, with a smile.

"Very little; and I don't mean to discuss his poor little visit any more. He staid hardly any time, and he looks very far from well," said Laura Gray, "and he must have been a great deal more ill, and his hurt a great deal worse than I had any idea of."

"Yes," said her visitor, abstractedly. "And — and what about Ardenbroke?"

"Still in Scotland."

"Enjoying himself, I daresay, and now and then writing letters. I should not be surprised, if he sometimes asked after me." The young gentleman was smiling.

"Now come, Mr. Dacre, you'll take nothing by your cleverness," she answered; "for I made up my mind long ago that I never would talk of one acquaintance to another; and therefore, one of your insinuated questions I won't answer."

"A misfortune it is to be gifted with a curious temperament, and I'm awfully curious, where sympathy is withheld, and illumination denied."

"I pity you immensely, but I can't assist you — no indeed."

"Can a poor curious devil prevail nothing by entreaty?"

"I renounce curious devils, and hold no parley with them."

"Quite obdurate?"

"Quite."

"Do you think a song might possibly prevail?"

"I don't say it will, but you shall try."

"Instantly."

And so he did.

## CHAPTER XX.

### UNMASKED.

HE did sing, and then they chatted about fifty things, he in the same gay spirits.

Swiftly and gaily flew the hour. Had he ever been so merry before? She felt his eyes upon her now and then as if he were meditating a talk perhaps of another kind. But if it was coming it was still deferred, and his wild spirits carried on their dialogue in its old channel.

As he talked on with a gaiety almost excited, there lay before him open on the piano, a pretty song which was then not old. Its words are taken from the fine lyrics of Rokeby, and it begins —

“Oh Brignall banks are wild and fair,  
And Greta woods are green,  
I’d rather roam with Edmund there  
Than reign our English queen.”

It is said that when a spirit enters the room, a chill is felt, and the lights at the moment faint, the powers of life suddenly subside, and with the shadow comes a sense of fear.

A change came suddenly over this young man’s face; it grew pale, and the ghost only of its smile still lingered there. He was looking down upon the open song, and his slender finger pointed to the bar on which his eye was fixed, and with a thrilling voice to the minor melody he sang the mysterious words of the outlaw —

“Maiden, a nameless life I lead,  
A nameless death I’ll die:

The fiend whose lantern lights the mead,  
Were better mate than I.”

The ghostly minor of the melody rang for a moment in the air; there was a silence, and then she heard his voice, very faintly, with a faint laugh, say —

“That’s pretty well for a tenor dying of consumption, so my doctors tell me, but I don’t believe them. And — *there* I stop. The last of my voice you have heard — in this room it will never sound again.”

There was a silence for a little time, and he rambled on —

“When a prodigal like *me* reappears, he may hear not a welcome but a scream; let him return to the darkness whence he came. Call for his ring — of iron, and the best robe — web and woof — a winding sheet. Miss Gray, I wonder as I stand before you, how I ever dared to profane your presence. How is it no instinct told you when I stole into your house that something evil had come; how did you look at me without a shudder? Good God! — how I pawned my very soul to reach you, and then, villain though I was, threw down my last stake to save you. I’ll not describe myself, my immeasurable treason and — adoration. But oh, Challys, remember I went away penitent, and with a heart quite broken, to expiate all I can of my crime, in uncomplaining misery. Good-by, and for God’s sake forgive me.”

His hands were clasped in agony, and his imploring eyes fixed on her, and he saw before him, not Challys Gray but her ghost. For a time he waited, but no answer came, and slowly he turned away to leave the room, with such a look of agony as a soul departing may turn for one moment, toward the eternal bar.

It is not easy to remember, far less to describe, the stun of a dreadful discovery. Challys Gray has had her warnings — she can’t complain — some vague misgivings too. But, alas! as the love is — so is the faith.

And now on a sudden, at her feet, the earth has opened, and the pale prophet is there, and she stands before him — hearing, yet not hearing — seeing, yet not seeing. There is just the dim consciousness that Alfred Dacre is going away for ever.

With a sudden cry, awaking as it were, Challys Gray said —

“Come back — come back — come back; I was always very frank — it does not matter now how I speak, and that is well, for I will hide nothing. Oh, Alfred, I love you more than you’ll ever be loved again, and I’ll never more care for any one on earth, and I wanted just to say that, and to bid you good-by for ever — and ever, and ever — good-by.”

She was looking up in his face, her hands were laid on his shoulders, and her face looked white and wild with misery.

He stooped and kissed her lips, in a dream, and when he raised his head again, those eyes of unutterable misery, that seemed looking into eternity, were still gazing up in his face, as if they had never moved.

“Shall I tell you all, Challys?” he said, almost in a whisper.

“Oh, no — no — no; you shall always be the same Alfred Dacre, my hero — no, nothing shall sully him, my one dream. Oh, Alfred, if you had died, and I had died, an hour after, and this had never been, and God had taken us to his mercy, and we had met— “

“Challys, if I could only show my unspeakable love — if I had but a chance to redeem my hopes — or to lay down my life for you — but God has denied me everything.”

“No, Alfred, there is one hope for us yet,” cried Challys, wildly; “if you remember poor Challys Gray, or care for her, you will travel a long pilgrimage, so will I patiently. A good man told me once that those that try, with all their hearts, to go to Heaven, will go there. There has been something very bad, — God help us all! who dare go before his judgment? — but *I’ll never* hear it; and if we try, it may be a long, and sorrowful journey, but at last we’ll reach it. And oh, Alfred, *Alfred*” she almost screamed, “we’ll *meet* — promise, promise, oh, don’t you promise — it is not good-by for *ever*; darling. I’ll see you there.”

He clasped her for one wild moment close in his arms. She felt the throbbing of his heart, and heard him say — but there was no voice in the words, a sob, a whisper— “Challys, Challys, my treasure — my darling,” and he went.

He hurried down the stairs, and through the hall. She heard the hall-door shut and the sound of the receding steps outside. With a bursting heart, she listened, and the roll of wheels, and the clash of the iron gate followed, and the last vestige of her dream was gone.

## CHAPTER XXI.

### ECLAIRCISSEMENT.

NEXT day in Mr de Beaumirail's rooms in the Fleet there was a stormy scene.

Mr. Levi had accompanied Mr de Beaumirail the night before in his carriage, attending on behalf of the triumvirate in command of the bodyguard who were posted secretly at the points of egress from the house, to secure that adventurer, should he a second time attempt to effect his escape.

The Jew's suspicions had been vaguely, but powerfully, aroused by the obstinate silence, and finally by the savage fury of the young man, on their way back. That did not look like the temper of a man on the eve of liberation and fortune. From De Beaumirail, however, he could, for that night, extract nothing, and he drove off to old Gillespie, and together they shrewdly and uncomfortably compared their surmises.

Next day, in consequence, in an uncomfortable state of doubt, looking grim and gloomy, after their several fashions, Messrs. Larkin, Gillespie, and Levi, assembled early in Mr de Beaumirail's sitting-room.

That gentleman lay obstinately on the sofa in his bedroom. Mr. Gillespie, however, at length came to be of opinion, that "these sort o' tricks could not be suffered longer," and accordingly he knocked and clamoured imperiously at his door, whereupon Mr de Beaumirail sprang to his feet, and confronted Gillespie, demanding, with a savage malediction, and a look of fury, what the devil he meant by making that noise in his rooms?

Whereupon Mr. Gillespie sturdily explained the object of their presence there, and declared that they expected Mr de Beaumirail to report progress, "and we require to know defeenitively how the matter stands?"

"It *stands*, sir," answered De Beaumirail, with a savage stamp on the floor.

"How the deil do you mean, sir?"

"Stock still," answered he; "your conspiracy has broken down, you three d — d scoundrels, and your money is buried under it; and if you ever dare to allude to it again in my presence, I'll brain you with the poker."

When his three visitors clearly saw how matters were, their fury boiled over.

Gillespie raved and cursed like an old bedlamite, and swore that one way or another he would "*have* him."

Levi more pointedly swore that he would leave no stone unturned to bring his French property into the court, and that he would never die till he saw him starving in prison.

And Mr. Larkin, black as thunder, swore not at all, but hinted his belief that the young gentleman had exposed himself to criminal proceedings, on what precise charge, however, he did not care to disclose.

But De Beaumirail brought all this yelling and thunder to an end by turning his enraged visitors out of his room. Some months ago he would have laughed in cynical gaiety over such a scene, but that spirit was dead and gone. Even the little excitement died away before the sound of their steps.

A bright eye — a bright hectic — and the clear pallor which doctors read so easily, showed this day in the handsome young face of the prisoner.

De Beaumirail was very ill. A nervous temperament — so highly strung and impulsive — cannot long withstand the agitations which try all people sorely in incipient disease. In his system the nerves and brain prevailed. The light and fire — passion and impulse of a fierce and volatile nature — dominated him; and now had come the reaction of apathy and despair.

It was toward sunset, as a man might know by the ruddy light upon the old brick chimney-tops visible from his window, when his old friend, Doctor Wiley, who generally amused a drowsy hour or so daily with De Beaumirail's case, dropped in to make his usual visit.

He asked him questions; listened at his waistcoat; and retailed, I am afraid unheard, between these professional exercises the dreary news and gossip of the place.

The doctor was in no hurry to go away. There was no fashionable brougham waiting at the door to whirl him at a showy pace away to sick lords' and great ladies' doors; he was rich, if in nothing else, in that invaluable treasure, time; and bestowed it liberally upon the fallen star of fashion, whose light was soon to be quenched for ever.

As usual, he read the backs of De Beaumirail's books, and tumbled over the leaves abstractedly, and whistled gently in his reverie — as he did when his talk was pretty well exhausted.

De Beaumirail seldom wished the harmless loiterer away; was often not conscious of his presence; and, as on this occasion, he stood in his dishabille at the window, with his lank thin hair, very gray, hanging over his ruddy forehead and somewhat dissipated nose, with a lackadaisical patient smile, and his dusty and faded clothes in the reflected light, he might have been sketched, De Beaumirail thought, with a shovel in his hand, for a boosy old village sexton.

"Well," said De Beaumirail, with a sudden sigh, and looking at him as if he had just awaked, "when am I to make my little excursion to the country?"

"Steal a march on the warden, hey? Is that what you're thinking of? No, no, we'll not give you a chance that way. You're too potent a spirit, sir, to be laid so easily."

"Spirit — spirits in wood — as the distillers say in the newspapers — they export some that way from this store sometimes," said De Beaumirail, listlessly.

"Ha, ha — spirits in wood — by Jove, sir, that's not so bad. Ha, ha, ha! But egad, sir, you're the sort of spirit that will keep a long time in the stone-jug, hey? and be nothing the worse."

"You're a goodnatured fellow; but I should be very glad to die."

"Come, none of your bosh and nonsense!" said the doctor, with a jolly air.

"I'm tired, sir."



“Tut, sir. Hang it — life’s sweet,” said the doctor, with a wave of his hand towards the court, as if the gaieties and glories of the world were there at his command.

“I suppose so, doctor; but it’s a sweet one tires of sometimes. I’ve had enough,” he sighed, “and I want sleep.”

“You’ll not be so tomorrow, sir,” said the doctor, kindly. “I’ve been that way myself now and then, sir; it clears up after a while, and who knows but a good time’s coming.”

And so, after a little more, the doctor withdrew; and shortly after the withdrawal of that luminary, twilight came, and a dismal attendant came in and lighted De Beaumirail’s candles.

“Many a rich fellow dying at this moment, who would give his soul to live ten years longer. How gladly I’d take his hours, and leave him my years, were they sixty.”

And to this bitter reflection, common to those who wish for death, we leave him.

## CHAPTER XXII.

### MR. DE BEAUMIRAIL AND HIS FATHER CONFESSOR.

"IT was very good of you to come, Mr. Parker," he said, more than an hour after, when the good old clergyman entered his door, "your trouble with me, I hope, will soon be ended, and I wanted to have a talk with you. I wanted to explain what has been going on; it will make you stare. I'll tell it shortly and intelligibly. You'll think me what I am when I have related my little story."

"Think you what you *are* — what do you mean?" asked Mr. Parker.

"The vilest miscreant on earth, except three — my three accomplices — Larkin, Levi, and Gillespie — but no, they are not so bad; they have excuses that I have not — I suppose — at least, they are three vulgar villains, and I — I ought to have recoiled from the cowardice of fraud."

"I'm totally in the dark, sir," said the old clergyman, "your language, I hope, is very exaggerated; I'm very sure it is, judging from all I know of you."

"My dear sir, you know *nothing* of me, no more than you do of that heinous Christian, Mr. Larkin."

"Oh! my dear sir, pray don't."

"I'll tell you my story, and then judge us all round, sir. Sit down, pray. How rude of me to have left you standing for so long."

The old man sat down, and De Beaumirail said —

"One promise only I exact before I make my disclosure — one word I tell you, you must never repeat to any living being — secrecy can no longer compromise anyone, and the only person who had a right to hear it, if she pleased, refused — and — she spared me that."

There was a silence for a little, and De Beaumirail, who had walked to the window and looked out for a time, to hide some violent emotion, returned and said —

"Well, sir, you promise?"

"Yes, I do sir, I see no difficulty."

"No, I conceal nothing. You must know then that when Miss Gray refused to subscribe the list of creditors consenting to give me my liberty, I conceived an intense hatred of her, and I would have gone great lengths for revenge. Levi, Larkin, and Gillespie, wanted to get me out; they fancied I could have been of immense use in introducing a project, by which they expected to make money, to some people of rank in Paris with whom I once was intimate — perhaps I could, perhaps I could not — it happened, however, that they were of that opinion, and resolved to make that use of me."

"I — I suppose they meant honourably, sir. You certainly did once know many influential people there," said Mr. Parker.

"All honourable men, sir; and being for a purpose anxious to get me out, they were as angry as I at our failure. And now, sir, the devil who was always at my side possessed me, and in my fury I threw out the spark that smouldered and kindled, and was not far from accomplishing an infernal sacrifice."

"I don't understand, sir; but you did abandon yourself to a vindictive and violent feeling," said Mr. Parker, reprovably.

"I knew nothing of Miss Gray's real character then. I thought it was just that cruel womanish malice that runs away with things, and thinks the world well lost for a sharp revenge. Good heavens! how I mistook her — and the recoil; well I deserve it. And now, sir, I'll tell you what my plan was — the plan of a miscreant — but I'm not the least ashamed of it; by Heaven, under the same persuasion I'd go into it again. I'm no slave of hypocrisies, and if I set about punishing an enemy, I do it effectually."

"I don't think, Mr. De Beaumirail, that I am a fitting repository for any such confidences," said the clergyman.

"Don't misunderstand me, sir; I do not tell it from the mere wish to talk about myself, but with a very serious purpose; pray permit me."

"Well, sir, on that ground."

"Thank you, Mr. Parker. Now, sir, here it was in effect. I said to those scoundrels, suppose you try a new enterprise; you can buy up my debts for a song, for three thousand pounds you can buy up thirty thousand; all but that young lady's. Then get me out of this place altogether, or at least every day — you know how to manage the warden — and I'll marry Miss Gray without a settlement; and you may pay yourselves out of Gray Forest — turn your three thousand into thirty — and I'll have my own share, and lead her a life. That was my retort on the young lady's imagined malice."

"Now, sir, again I say, this shocking disclosure ought not to have been for my ears," said the old gentleman, aghast.

"Sir, there's nothing in it; you may take it up in your hands and examine it. That infernal machine can never explode, thank Heaven, and you *promised* to hear me. Now, Mr. Parker, I was naturally a conceited fellow, having had some success in a brilliant world. I was young and all that, and I had some music and drawing and all the kind of thing that interests girls; and I thought the devil was in it, — I beg your pardon, I mean that it would be very strange indeed if, with certain conditions, an impression were not made. Nothing could be more favourable. Here was a young lady who knew *nothing* of the world, who had passed the few years that might otherwise have been given to seeing something of that great and noisy place, in attendance upon an invalid father, and who was at the time living a life of entire seclusion, with no one to take care of her but a very foolish old woman."

"Merciful Heaven, sir! How could you engage in such a cruel imposture?"

"You can't comprehend it, but *I* can tell you; put a fellow in here for three or four of the best years of his life, with a moral certainty of ending his days in his prison, and give him a chance to recover liberty and fortune by the same *coup* that punishes his worst enemy, and you'll not find him troubled with many scruples about it. You have no idea of what a man who is good for anything becomes in a place like this; when he sees his years and his chances gliding from him, and no chance of going out but in his coffin."

The clergyman made no answer, but remained with ear inclined, looking downward with a look of pain.

"Well, sir, Mr. Gillespie learned that Miss Gray was coming to the opera, and, after nearly four years passed within these walls, I emerged. We sat in a box nearly opposite, for it was as well that I should see the young lady; and a harmless accident to her carriage as she returned home had been arranged with her coachman, to enable me, under the name of Dacre, to introduce myself by a little service, and to found on it an excuse for a visit of inquiry; and so the acquaintance was made. That night at the opera, as luck would have it, Ardenbroke saw and knew me; and — in the dark, like the rest of the world, as to where I had been for years — I told him such lies as answered my purpose, and tied him by a promise not to mention my name or visit, as I called it, to London. I'm afraid, sir, you think I have taken a liberty with your text, and let my yea be nay, and my nay yea; and so it was from first to last, almost — not *quite* — last of this villany."

"I'm filled, I confess, sir, with astonishment and horror."

"So you ought — so ought I — I suppose. But my theory is, that if you practise a deception, it ought to be thoroughly practised. It is illogical to stick at subsidiary lies. The fraud seems now to me odious, mean, and truculent, because I have ceased to think of its contemplated victim as I did. Nothing draws man and woman together like a secret to be kept between them; nothing gratifies the pride and elicits the love of woman like a man's devoting himself to danger for her sake; nothing cherishes that tenderness like being, by any means always present to her thought; nothing heightens the romantic feeling like a little mystery — all this was provided for by some real reserves; for I dared not tell her who I was, and for plain reasons I was obliged to conduct my stolen exits from this place with caution; for had I been seen and recognised, it might have cleared matters up with a clap of thunder. But it was provided for elaborately by a cruel imposture, which amused me, the drama of a pretended conspiracy conducted by anonymous letters."

"All *that* I hate to think of now. When I conceived it I was mad with malice and misery; it was delight to me to torture my enemy in the process of subjugation."

Mr. Parker sighed deeply.

"I see, sir, all this pains you. I don't mind telling you, now that it wrings my own heart with anguish and fury to think of my stupidity — how long it was before my eyes were opened. Good heavens, sir! that I should have seen a fiend in that angel! Oh, sir — oh, Mr. Parker, I don't believe that any human soul ever suffered before what I am enduring now: not remorse — no. I despise that feeling, — but an eternal leavetaking, the separation of the damned. I should lose my reason or cut my throat if it were not for one hope."

"The Christian has always — if he will only look for it — in his darkest hour, and wildest wanderings, a hope eternal as the love and truth of God," said Mr. Parker.

"To that hope, sir, my eyes are blind. The hope I mean is death."

"Let every man labour while it is called day, that death may prove repose for him. He thinks of the poor body on its pillow of clay, and of death as no more than a cold slumber; but no, sir, the body is but the cenotaph he leaves behind him. The man himself is awake, and far away, receiving the recompense of his life."

"We'll not dispute about that now, sir," answered De Beaumirail, gently enough. "I'm willing to take it as a sleep, and I think it is not far off. I'm sure it isn't. I could not feel as I do if it were; and now, sir, you'll never tell her while I live who was that Alfred Dacre who grew from hating to love her so."

After a short silence the old clergyman said thoughtfully —

"Why, Mr. De Beaumirail, should you not write to the young lady and tell her this whole truth?"

"Write to her! I'd die a thousand deaths first. While I live she shall never know more; no, if she had commanded it I should have confessed all, but she was merciful; that dreadful ordeal she remitted; and now, if you, my one true friend, from a mistaken kindness, betray me, by Heaven I'll put a pistol to my head, and end my life the hour I hear it. Oh, sir, I rely on you — your promise — you won't betray me."

"Sir, I'll keep my promise. Without your leave I never dreamed of speaking to Miss Gray on the subject; only it seemed to me a natural thing to do," said the old man.

"Ah! sir, you don't know. But when I'm dead you may — you will; and say that, adoring her as I did, I honoured her too much to shock her with the revelation of my name. Tell her she could never have thought more vilely of me than I do of myself; and that what I dared not have sued for while living, she will, perhaps, grant to the dead — forgiveness. And, oh! sir — you'll not forsake me."

"You shall see me, sir, at least as often as ever; and — about your health — pray tell me who is your medical man," asked Mr. Parker.

De Beaumirail smiled.

"You've seen him here once or twice, and might have taken him for what he metaphorically is — a grave-digger. He is a fellow-lodger in this retired wing of the palace of justice, and his name is Wiley."

"A skilful man, I hope?"

"Really, sir, I don't know; but I have what is termed entire confidence in him. Never refuse to see him, drunk or sober. Allow him to feel my pulse, and listen to the secrets of my heart. Let him call my complaints by what hard names he pleases, and I never interrupt him; and in so far may be said to take his advice, but not his medicine; and I believe he is a jolly, half-mad, miserable prisoner like myself."

"Well, I must say good night. I think you seem a little better," said Mr. Parker, "and I hope you'll find yourself a great deal better tomorrow."

"Thanks, sir. Fellows like me, who live in this odd place, are always *going* to be better tomorrow. It is the easiest way of improving, and leads a man cheerfully on his journey like the bell that tinkles between the donkey's ears, and always an inch or two in advance, amuses the Alpine march."

And having said these words, he bid his old friend good night. "Goodnight, sir," said Mr. Parker, "and I will look in very soon again," and away he went; and De Beaumirail stood looking down the dark void of the staircase, in deeper misery than anyone who had listened to his cynical trifling, a moment before, could have imagined. It was about the hour when, well muffled to escape recognition at the door, he used to walk out, accompanied by old Gillespie, or it might be by Mr. Levi, well known and influential people in that locality, and get into his brougham and go off in a dream to Guildford House.

## CHAPTER XXIII.

### MUTAT TERRA VICES.

IN a little time Lord Ardenbroke returned to London. A note awaited him which quite relieved him on the uneasy subject of Guildford House and its masquerading visitor.

It was written by De Beaumirail, and reminded him that he was under promise of secrecy, and upon the sole condition of his continuing to observe it, now promised that no communication, by letter or message, should ever again be opened with the tenants of that mansion. It said— “When you heard that the pretended Alfred Dacre was admitted at Guildford House, I can understand your surprise and anxiety only too well. You will not inflict upon a very miserable man the additional anguish of a useless disclosure. I appeal to your magnanimity and your justice. I enclose the address of a friend who will see you, should you wish it, and answer in confidence any questions you may care to ask. But I submit I have a right to your silence, and I insist on your promise to respect my secret.”

Lord Ardenbroke did hold his tongue very scrupulously on the subject, seeing that no duty any longer conflicted with, this claim of secrecy.

And now the House was up, the season quite over, and London emptied of its great people, and even in large measure of its small. The dowager Lady Ardenbroke was at Brighton, and her son on the Scotch moors. But Guildford House had not closed its shutters, nor locked its doors. Challys Gray lingered on, and Julia Wardell dozed contentedly over her crochet and her novel, and walked her dog up and down the avenue twice a day, and noted his appetite and spirits with more than maternal solicitude, and I daresay the servants’ hall and housekeeper’s room had their ideas respecting the humdrum life to which they were condemned.

Challys Gray had found a new pursuit. Was she changed? There was not change enough for Julia Wardell, who was with her day by day, to take note of. She chatted very much as usual; she went out as usual in her carriage; there was the customary shopping; and sometimes she recurred to her old plan of foreign travel, and made ideal tours, and seemed interested with maps and guide-books for an hour at a time.

But for all that there was a change. It had come in a moment. An eternal farewell to the untold hope. The feeling that grew, day by day, duller and darker — that time was doing nothing

“To lift that longing from her heart.”

She had taken old Mr. Parker very much into counsel, and also a curate who had the care of the district round her. She had made herself, after the manner of young ladies grieved at heart, who have no nunneries to go into, a Dorcas, a volunteer Sister of Mercy. I merely mention this very commonplace fact, having no intention of following her little rambles or visitations among the sick and needy.

Of course she talked to these poor people, and gave them good little books and other things. But when young ladies visit so, it is, as a rule, their money that is welcome, and not their tracts, nor, I am afraid, even their pretty faces.

It was, however, occupation, and of that grave, melancholy, and yet comforting sort which accords with a mind wounded, and in danger of subsiding into utter apathy.

Charles Mannering was now a great deal better, and every day at Guildford House; and with a sure instinct, conscious, though he never hinted that sad knowledge to anyone, that Challys Gray had known her first love — blighted it might be — yet, still, there would always remain that preoccupation. Challys Gray, *he* could see, though good Mrs. Wardell did not, was quite changed.

She laughed and talked pretty much as usual; but often she fell into reveries, in which she looked, so sad and hopeless, that he wondered that anyone on earth, could be worth so much of Challys Gray’s sorrow.

Very devoted he was. He walked with her on her little daily circuits, carried her little basket, for she was in a mood that yearned for all kinds of humilities, and no servant attended her, and Challys thought she was doing “good works,” and that she had never known what “charity” was before. But Challys had always been kind and open-handed. In the matter of liberality there was nothing to change. The change was in the mode and practice of distribution, and was, on the whole, harmless, and to herself useful. It afforded her occupation, and introduced her to scenes that accorded with her melancholy mood, and gave her sterner, and also tenderer notions of God’s dealings with His creatures than inexperienced people in her rank of life entertain; it startled her also with a nearer sense of the responsibilities of wealth, and filled her with a juster awe of futurity.

This kind of thing, thought Charles Mannering, can’t last for ever, and when she gives it up it will be a sign that she has come to herself, also, in other matters. “It may take some time,” and he sighed, “but one day or another it will be so.”

So we reason — the head against the heart — logic against the presentiment. The steel passes through the phantom and it stands there still. The shadowy augury is not of reason, and will not be killed by its weapon.

Charles Mannering knew that she was changed, and felt, as other men have felt, that the heart over which a sorrowful first-love has passed, will never be quite the same again. With this melancholy, however, there was now a quietude. The agitation and the burning gall of rivalry he had done with, and he was always near beautiful Challys Gray.

It was late in October now. The leaves were rustling on the avenue, or skipping and whirling over the grass, in the rough autumnal gusts, and still pretty Challys Gray remained at Guildford House, and the nun-like life went on.

One day she said to old Mr. Parker, who had come, as was his wont, with a list of “cases of distress,” to Challys Gray, whose purse was always open —

"I have been thinking, Mr. Parker, about that poor prisoner—"

She paused at these words reflectively. "What poor prisoner, Miss Gray?" the old man asked, a little inquisitively.

"I mean Mr de Beaumirail," she answered.

"Oh, Mr de Beaumirail! Yes — yes — to be sure," repeated he.

And he looked steadily on her, with a kind of apprehension, expecting something.

But Challys Gray looked quite frank, and her face indicated neither doubt nor reserve, as she continued —

"You told me once, Mr. Parker, that my feeling about that matter was a superstition, and that no such auguries should stand in the way of an act of simple mercy. I could not listen to you then; but I have been thinking, and I have made up my mind to oppose his release no longer."

"But, my dear Miss Gray, it is no longer in your power; the other creditors have withdrawn their consent, and nothing can now persuade them to renew it."

"I'm very sorry; but I'm glad I spoke before I knew this new difficulty. Well, if this cannot be, at least you must persuade him to allow me, through you, to be of some use."

"You mean, Miss Gray, to furnish him with money. I dare not hint at such a thing. I know very well how such a proposal would be received. Besides you need have no uneasiness upon that point. He has some property in France which his creditors cannot touch, and which is ample for all his present wants; and he is not, I fear, likely very long to enjoy any rights that remain to him, for the physician that attends him seems to think that his life now hangs upon a thread."

"Ill, is he? — Fever, or what is his complaint?" she asked, evidently shocked.

"No, nothing of that kind. One of those complaints of the heart, his doctor says, which may kill him at any moment," answered Mr. Parker.

"I have behaved very cruelly," she said, with a contraction of her brow, as she looked down, very pale, "but not with a cruel motive — no — no — *not* with a cruel motive — I never was cruel; I was often angry, but never cruel or unforgiving — *say* that of me — you know it, Mr. Parker."

"I *do* know it, Miss Gray. I never charged you with anything worse than an entirely erroneous idea of your duty; there is no use in discussing it now, because no practical effect can now result from it, and you have shown that you cease to hold that opinion by offering to sign his release."

"Sir, I'm glad you understand. It is very unhappy — what a world this is!"

"I have been out of town for some days, and mean to see him tomorrow, when I am making my visits, between three and four, and if you desire it I can mention the wishes, you have expressed."

"And tell him, sir, that I ask his forgiveness, and would receive the news that he had accepted my offer with gratitude as a token of that forgiveness."

And thus charged, Mr. Parker took his departure.

## CHAPTER XXIV.

### REQUIESCAT.

Three days later old Mr. Parker was at Guildford House, very grave, with something to tell.

He did not go up to the drawingroom, where the ladies were. He asked to see Miss Gray in the library, only for a few minutes.

The young lady came down, and when she looked on his face there came a foreboding of ill.

Pretty much as usual he greeted her; but there was a little constraint, and a hesitation about opening his business, that made her ask, with a rather alarmed look fixed on him —

“Is there any news — anything about any friend of mine?”

“No, nothing; I can’t say anything about your *friends*, Miss Gray, but about Mr de Beaumirail; I have to tell you first that you need think of him or his troubles no more.”

There was a silence, and after two or three seconds Miss Gray said, very low —

“Oh, really!” as she looked in a kind of sorrowful consternation in the old man’s eyes.

“Yes; he died very suddenly on Monday evening. He had been as usual. The doctor says, he talked with him in the course of the day, and saw no change. He might, he says, humanly speaking, have possibly lived for a year or more.”

“Were you with him?” she asked.

“Yes; I changed my plans after seeing you, and went there, and I found him at his desk reading some old letters. He was very much dejected. He asked all about you, so I gave him your message, and he seemed affected; and he said, ‘I forgive *her*! Ah, sir, you know that is folly. I only hope the time will come when she will forgive me; I know it will; her forgiveness will follow me to the grave, for death is the seal of repentance, and she will know me better when I die.’ So I told him I had met the doctor in the court, and that he had not apparently any unusual apprehensions about him, and he smiled and said, ‘The blind leading the blind. I don’t mind doctors; but there’s an understanding between the dying man and death, and signs as slight as lovers’ exchange, of which *they* see nothing; therefore don’t mind him.’ And then he made me tell him over again all about you, and he said, after a silence, ‘Have you ever heard her sing?’”

“How came he to know that I sang? But I have not for some time — and I think I never shall again,” she said.

“And when he had talked a little more,” continued Mr. Parker, “seemingly all the time very sad, and in a gentle mood, he said at last, ‘Would you mind opening that window? I should like a little more air.’ It was just at sunset, and he said, smiling, ‘Look at those old brick chimneys; isn’t it odd, everything in this light looks picturesque, and even sad? I watch them every evening till the twilight hides them. People learn ways of making time pass, sir, in places like this and then he told me over again his message to you, and he said with a little gasp, ‘Is there air?’ and with one slight gasp more he suddenly fell back. I thought he had fainted; I could not believe it was all over. I called the doctor, whom I saw walking in the court, and when he came he saw how it was. He was gone.”

“Oh, dear, sir, it’s very sad and dreadful, and yet what could I do?”

“I gave him your message, and told him of your offer; and although it was as I thought, and he could not accept it, he was very grateful, and very much moved.”

“I’m glad you told him — it was kind. I am very much obliged — and pray tell me all he said.”

“He spoke of your forgiveness in the terms I mentioned, and he said, pointing to his desk, ‘As you came in, I was reading a note of hers.’”

“Reading a note of mine! A note written by *me*, do you mean?”

“I have been charged by him, Miss Gray, to make an explanation which pains me; I wish the task had devolved on any other person.”

Mr. Parker was speaking with averted eyes, and with the profound embarrassment of one who expects to awaken very painful emotions.

“Pray do; I am quite in the dark, and can’t think how Mr de Beaumirail could have obtained possession of any note of mine; though, perhaps, indeed it does not very much matter, for I have never written a note in which I need wish anything changed, or need in the least regret.”

Mr. Parker sighed and shook his head, and seemed at a loss how to proceed. But it was to be got through somehow, so he said —

“He did not say what they were; he did not speak of them as being on any subject of the least importance; he merely spoke of them as relics which he prized very dearly. And when he spoke of your music, it was in reference to a time, not many months ago, when he, under a feigned name, used to come here and contribute to it in the evenings, — indeed, for a time, nearly every evening.”

As he thus spoke Mr. Parker raised his eyes, and was startled. Challys Gray was standing before him with a face so wild and pale, her hand pressed to her temple, that he expected to see her drop to the ground.

With a wild cry came the words, “Oh, it was Alfred Dacre, and you hid it! Oh, wicked old man! how *could* you? And it was this — and in prison. Oh, Alfred, Alfred; oh, God, he’s *gone*!”

She had caught him by the arm, and was clasping it with trembling hands, as she gazed with her large affrighted eyes in his face.

“You’ll see, Miss Gray, by-and-by,” he pleaded, “you will indeed, that I am not the least to blame in this matter. I could not divulge, without violating a solemn promise, the little he had chosen to disclose.”

“You let him die, you cruel old man, and never told me; and I — I — oh, my God, I have killed him!”

"Miss Gray, listen to me, I entreat," said the old man, gently. "From all I can learn, no power on earth could have saved him. He died of some affection of the heart. I forget the name, but the doctor tells me it must have been established more than a year ago; certainly before you saw him, and probably at least a full year before that time; therefore, as to the event, his remaining in prison, or coming out, was quite immaterial."

"And where is he? Oh, take me to him — I must see him."

"Poor child, that can't be; he was laid in his last resting-place this morning. I attended and read the service," said he.

For some time she was silent, gazing in his face, and then, with a long, low, and bitter cry, the storm broke — wild words, better forgotten.

He was glad when she burst into tears, and wept for some time in silence.

The old man, experienced in grief, did not interrupt, and the silence was broken her only by moaning and convulsive sobs.

"Oh, tell me everything," at last she said; "tell me from the beginning, that I may try to understand; you saw it all." And he told his sad story from first to last, and then again — and then again — and then they talked, she still weeping, for a long time; and at last he went, and she ran up to her room, and locked the door, and kneeled with her head on the side of her bed, weeping wildly, and that evening she did not go down.

Next day the old clergyman called again, and Miss Gray went down, cloaked and veiled, to the library, and they drove away in a cab which he had brought there. It was to the cemetery where De Beaumirail is laid.

## CHAPTER XXV.

### CONCLUSION.

NEARLY a year after, Challys Gray at length put her long-deferred plan of foreign travel in execution, and about a year later she and Julia Wardell were joined at Naples by old Lady Ardenbroke and her son.

Two years had passed, therefore, since the occurrences mentioned in the preceding chapters. That faithful fellow, Charles Mannering, with now and then a month's absence in England, was always in attendance, only to be employed reading to them in the evenings, and supplying, on all occasions, his convenient escort. Lord Ardenbroke's pretty yacht was in the bay. There was just breeze enough for a lazy sail, and Lord Ardenbroke, beside Miss Gray, no one overhearing, as the fleet schooner glided through the smooth water, said —

"Why don't you, Challys, follow a good example?"

"Whose example?"

"Charles Mannering's."

Lord Ardenbroke looked very arch as he said this, and Laura, a little perplexed and curious, looked at him expectingly.

He only laughed.

"Well," she said, "I don't see anything particularly to imitate in him, except that he is the best creature in the world."

"And if there can be two best, you are one of them Challys; but that isn't it; he's going home, you know, isn't he?"

"Yes," said Challys, looking hard at her companion; "but he'll be coming back, I suppose, in four or five weeks?"

"Don't be too sure of that," said he, with a laugh.

"Well, he has not told me; I suppose he'll do as he likes about that; but what do you mean?"

"Can you keep a secret, Challys?"

"A secret? yes — I hope I can."

"Well you must promise quite seriously that you'll not let Charles know that you have heard a word about it, for he'd know instantly that it was I who had told."

"Yes, I'll promise; now tell me."

"You are not to mention it even to my mother."

"No, no one. I wish he was here, and I'm certain that he'd tell without any fuss. Has anyone left him money?"

"Oh, he has lots of that already. No, it ain't anything like that. Now, you're not to tell Charles, and you're not to tell anyone else; isn't that quite understood?"

"Yes; do pray, tell me."

"Well, I think Charles is going to be married."

"Oh!" she said, coldly enough. "Not at all an unlikely thing — I always thought he *would* marry — but why should he make such a secret of it?"

"Because he's not quite sure that the young lady will say 'yes;' but *I* am, and he'll be married in four or five weeks."

"I'm sure he'll be very happy, and he has kept his secret very well. Dear me, isn't there more smoke than usual from the mountain?"

"No, it's only the light."

"And, I forget, did you say who the young lady is?" said Miss Challys, carelessly, still looking toward the distant Vesuvius.

"No, I daren't tell her name, but she is as nice a girl as ever you saw. They were in the same hotel with you two months ago; in Rome you never saw a prettier creature. Do you remember, when we were passing through Rome, you told me that Charles was absent two or three hours every day on pretence of sketching, and that you saw very little to show for the time — how I laughed! I knew the thing was going on then."

"I suppose so; he has been very secret."

"Very sly," laughed Lord Ardenbroke.

"Although, of course, there was no reason why he should be in any particular hurry to tell; and I'm sure we had no right to look for disclosures earlier than other people. I'm sure, I hope he'll be very happy, but I think he's making rather a fool of himself."

Ardenbroke laughed — "Really?"

"Yes; why should you laugh? He need not have been in any hurry, that I can see. He had time enough, goodness knows; and I think anyone who is so entirely his own master, and leading so happy a life, *is* rather a fool to change everything, and put his happiness in another person's keeping."

"I see here the spirit of the 'virgin Queen' ascendant. No courtier permitted to marry."

Ardenbroke laughed as he said this, but Miss Gray, so far from laughing, or even smiling, looked rather bored, and then talked about something else.

And so they chatted through this slow, luxurious sail; and when they landed in the punt, Charles Mannering was waiting to take her cloak and book, and contrived to look so innocent that Ardenbroke could not forbear smiling as he caught her eye. But she either did not see, or did not choose to see, and gave her parasol and book to Lord Ardenbroke; and when she was obliged to see Charles Mannering, she gave him a rather chilly smile, and said, "Writing letters at home, I suppose?"

"Writing letters, yes; how did you find that out?"

But she did not answer; and looking seaward, made some remarks, instead, to Lord Ardenbroke, upon the peculiar green tint of the water, which Charles did not very well hear; and she passed him by, and walked upstairs, when they got home, in rather a stately way.



When she reached her room, she locked the door, and threw herself into a chair, and — wept.

"I thought I had one friend — one friend — and I've lost him — good old Charlie; — I have no one now."

And on this theme she wept for a time. Then recollecting, she dried her tears, and bathed her eyes and cheeks, to remove the appearance of recent weeping, and came down more cheerfully than she had for a long time, and was very gay and chatty at tea. But, somehow, Charles fancied himself a little in disgrace.

The gentlemen went out after tea for a stroll and a cigar. Julia Wardell sat at an open window looking affably at the distant sea, and babbling to her dog; and Challys Gray found herself sitting beside the old dowager Lady Ardenbroke, who said— "It was quite delightful, my dear, to listen to you this evening."

"Why, what did I say?"

"Nothing very particular; but you seem to have found your spirits again."

"Found them, have I? I was not aware that I had lost them," said Challys.

"Come, come, my dear, I'm a shrewd old woman; I have heard more than you think," and she laughed and shook her head.

"I really don't know what you mean," said Challys, first blushing very brilliantly, and then growing very pale.

"You ought to tell me that kind of nonsense, my dear, instead of allowing it to prey upon your spirits; every foolish little fancy, if one broods over it in solitude, grows into the dimensions of a tragedy. You ought to talk with me; you can't, you know, to Mrs. Wardell, because — though she's a good old soul — she's stupid, and she could not understand you."

"But who, dear Lady Ardenbroke, has been telling you all these stories about me? "My dear, I've heard quite enough from that good, dull creature who is talking to her dog in the window, to understand — though she doesn't — that there was a very foolish little fancy that ought to have been quite forgotten in as many weeks as it has taken years— "

"You mean— " began Challys, with her eyes fixed on the carpet.

"I *do*," said the old lady, "and I can tell you that anything so wild and silly as your allowing yourself to *think* of such a person as Mr de Beaumirail, even at the best — so vain, selfish, violent, and unprincipled— "

"Oh, no, no, *no* I you *mustn't* — I can't bear it! You never knew him. He sacrificed himself for me."

"Well, dear, if you will have it so, and that it pains you my talking so plainly, I'll only say, that if you had consulted me, I should have warned you instantly; and I now tell you that if he had not owed a guinea, and been just as when he came of age, no one who took the least interest in you would have allowed you to dream of him as a husband; he never could have made anyone happy, and there is no good in our affecting to think differently from everyone who knew him. Ardenbroke knew him at one time very well, and, though he thought him amusing, he knew perfectly well that he was everything I describe him; and although he had lost sight of him for years, and knew nothing of the *utter* ruin that had befallen him, I do assure you he was in an agony to get back from Scotland all that time, and I could not make out for what and only that he was kept there in spite of himself, and not able to put off people, he would have come up to town about it; and Heaven only knows what might have happened, for he, in his own way, is just as fiery as De Beaumirail was, and the idea of putting such a person in comparison with that nice, honest, gentle creature, Charles Mannering — I think you must have been bereft of your senses! Charles Mannering is such a gentleman, and such a charming companion, and so goodnatured — I could really almost beat you."

"Well, darling, I'll not talk any more, for it's all a retrospect now, and you know I've settled that I'm to be an old maid." And with a smile, and a very deep sigh, she pointed Lady Ardenbroke's attention away from such things, to the brilliant moonlight that was quivering on the waters beneath them.

That night Lord Ardenbroke found himself at the window beside Challys Gray, just before his good night, and he whispered, laughing, "Well, have you made out anything more about Charles?"

"Oh, no; I shouldn't think of asking; of course we'll have it all in good time."

"Well, I do think, though, he might have told you; he doesn't know, I assure you, that I gave you the least hint, but you are such old friends."

"Oh, really, there's no hurry," said the young lady; "why should there? Besides, the young lady, whoever she is, might like to choose who's to hear it all first."

"Well, I'm going home now, and he'll have time to cool by morning, so I don't care if he's a little angry; and I give you leave to tell him, after I've gone, if you like it. I suppose he's a little shy. Good night!"

And away he went, and said a word or two to Charles at the door. She fancied he was advising a confidence to her; she did not quite know how she felt; her pride was wounded; but, also, she was resolved that he should not think she cared; and, therefore, when he came near the window, with a remark about the sea and the moonlight, she managed to receive him very nearly in her usual way. So they talked on and compared notes on the picturesque; and finally she said carelessly —

"What day, I forget, do you set out for home?"

"Not till this day week, I think."

"Oh! Isn't that a mistake?"

"How? I don't see," he said.

"I always think, when one has to make a journey, it is better to start as soon as possible, particularly when it is going to be a pleasant journey."

"Pleasant? I did not say it was to be pleasant."

"Oh! but I heard all about it," said Challys. "Dear me! what a noise that little dog makes."

"But do you mean you really heard anything? What *did* you hear?"

"Of course you know what I heard; you told it all to Ardenbroke, and Ardenbroke told it to me."

"Ardenbroke! I told him nothing," answered Charles.

"Oh, nonsense, you did," said Challys, lighting up suddenly with a little flush and brilliant eyes; "you told him you were going to England to marry, or rather to try to marry some one; and I'm sure there's no need to make such a fuss about nothing, or next to nothing."

"And you believe all that nonsense?" he said, after a moment's silence, looking straight at her with kind and sad eyes. "I did not think, Challys, you thought me so — I can't find exactly a word; but I thought you were the last person in the world who

could have believed such a story.”

“I don’t know; I don’t see anything so incredible in it.”

“Yes, Challys, you do — that is, if you know and understand me ever so little — you must see that it is *quite* incredible — you must see that I hate going away, even for two or three weeks, and that my only happiness is to be near you.”

She looked at him with still that blush, and with the half-quenched fire in her eyes, timidly almost, and lowered her eyes again.

“You are very kind, Charlie, to say so, for I’m sure I’ve been often very cross and very ungrateful.”

At this point I hear nothing but the snarling of the dog and the nonsensical caresses of good Julia Wardell. I don’t approach the two young people, who carry on their colloquy in the same low tone, I verily believe, without so much as being: conscious of the noise that Mrs. Wardell and her dog are kicking up.

Half an hour goes by, and half an hour more, during which Julia Wardell, at her window, has been taking a nap. The dog is lying on his cushion, coiled round with his head to his tail, and one eye vigilantly watching Charles Mannering’s back, with an air of covert suspicion. The young people are still talking very low, and can I believe my eyes! — Charles Mannering has stolen his hand slyly round Challys Gray’s slender waist — and there seems no resistance; and they whisper on and on — and he actually kisses her — once, twice, thrice; and I know not how often the indiscretion might have been repeated, had not Mrs. Wardell, waking suddenly, said —

“Were you speaking to me, dear?”

“I? No, darling,” answered Challys’s voice from the other window; and in obedience to some imperious signal, I suppose, Charles Mannering’s hand stole slyly to his own side, and he said, quite innocently, “Can I do anything, Mrs. Wardell?”

“No, thanks,” answered that lady; “but, dear me, how the candles have burnt down — how the time goes while one’s thinking, and that exquisite view — and — is it really? — upon my life, it is nearly one o’clock! My *dear* Challys, what have we been thinking of? we can’t live without sleep. Mr. Mannering, don’t you think — it’s very rude of me — but isn’t it very late?”

So Charles apologized, and looked at his watch and laughed, and bid good night, and had another little whisper with Challys at the window, and bid good night again, and then another whispering word, and so good night once more, and now really departed-

But he might have been seen, as the old novels say, for ever so long after, walking slowly to and fro under the trees, and looking up at the windows of the house, in a rapture, in a dream, with a heart tumultuous with pride.

Next morning at breakfast Charles Mannering mentioned that he had put off his visit to England, and as the ladies did not care for the yacht that day, Charles went off with Ardenbroke, and during their sail, I fancy, had a good deal to tell him.

Challys Gray had also something to tell, and surprised Mrs. Wardell, and afterwards drove out with old Lady Ardenbroke, who returned in very genial spirits.

I need not, I think, lead the reader on to a sequel which so palpably announces itself.

That kind person who has listened to my story for so long, would hardly find patience were I to hold him for five minutes more by the button while filling his ear with details which he is quite willing to take for granted, and which I must confess have nothing unusual in them. Happy the people whose annals are dull — married folks especially. The uncertainties, agitations, suspenses, and catastrophes, which are the life of romance, and the natural fare of lovers, are by no means compatible with the possibility of domestic happiness and decorum.

To say, then, that in their married state the lives of Challys Gray and Charles Mannering were as happy as mortal could desire, is simply to say that no reader would care to look into those comfortable chapters of biography.

I may mention, however, as particular contributions to that happiness, that their union has been blessed with five fair children, and it will be a comfort to those good souls who love Debrett, and cognate studies, to learn that Charles Mannering is within one of a Peerage by one of those sudden, oblique descents which demonstrate that *Death*, that utterly democratic officer, knocks as sharply at great houses as at small, and arrests an heir apparent and an heir presumptive with as little ceremony as he would two tailors. Charles Mannering’s old bachelor uncle has now the title. Some people say he is going to marry. Others as positively say no. But Charles as resolutely keeps the matter out of his mind; and I should not be surprised any day at hearing that he was now Lord Weybroke.

THE END